Love Stories of the Real West

RANCH ROMANCES

15c

SECOND JULY NUMBER

Strangers in Topok

By JAMES W. ROUTH

A novelette by DOROTHY L. BONAR

Love Got On at Buffalo

by Gordon Kay

THE MOMENT she sank into the seat beside him in the crowded Club car Jackson's heart skipped a beat.

As the miles flew by, jeweled bits of informa- ı fell from her lips . . . she was an artist . . . she been visiting her father in Buffalo. Yes, she her way back to her home in New York. girl in a million," thought Jackson, re- g Manhattan's vastness. He hoped she ried. When she confessed she wasn't, h relief.

gaged!" she laughed. "Not even anyone."

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no way ing the things.

earned ly girl who had swept him off his feet. Desperately he hurried through the aisles looking for her . . . in vain.

At last, as he raced along the platform, he had a glimpse of her thru the window, headed for the observation car. And there he caught up with her.

"Darling!" he blurted . . . then checked himself. "Your name! Your address! Your telephone number! You can't go out of my life like this!"

As the train started to move, she hastily plucked a card from her handbag, scribbled upon it, and, smiling quizzically, handed it to him. His eyes followed her figure in the twilight as long as they could, then looked down at the card. It read:

Mary Jones
New York City

* * *

Jackson never knew why she banished him so adroitly—and so completely—from her life. One could scarcely blame her. After all, there are few things more offensive than halitosis (unpleasant breath). Regardless of your other good points, it can stamp you as a person to be avoided.

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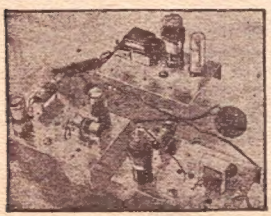

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SECOND JULY NUMBER

July 11, 1947
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RANCH ROMANCES

ON SALE EVERY OTHER FRIDAY

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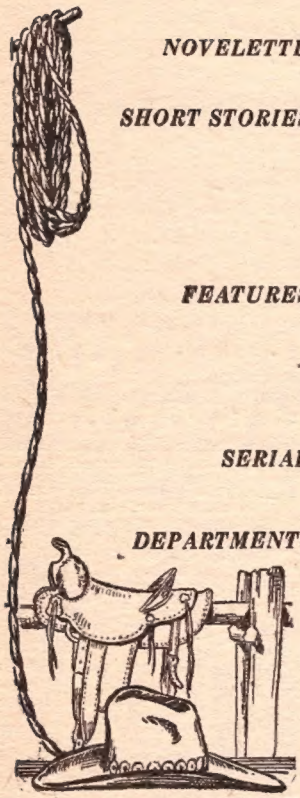

FANNY ELLSWORTH, Editor

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ELTINGE F. WARNER, President — ELMER J. CHAMBERS, Treasurer — FANNY ELLSWORTH, Secretary

Out of some cold figures, came a story to warm America's heart

NOT LONG AGO, the Secretary of the United States Treasury studied a figure-covered sheet of paper.

The figures revealed a steady, powerful upswing in the sale of U. S. Savings Bonds, and an equally steady decrease in Bond redemptions.

But to the Secretary, they revealed a good deal more than that, and Mr. Snyder spoke his mind:

"After the Victory Loan, sales of U. S. Savings Bonds went down—redemptions went up. And that was only natural and human.

"It was natural and human—but it was also dangerous. For suppose this trend had continued. Suppose that, in this period of reconversion, some 80 million Americans had decided not only to stop saving, but to spend the $40 billion which they had *already* put aside in Series E, F & G Savings Bonds. The picture which *that* conjures up is not a pretty one!

"But the trend did NOT continue.

"Early last fall, the magazines of this country —nearly a thousand of them, acting together —started an advertising campaign on Bonds. This, added to the continuing support of other media and advertisers, gave the American people the facts . . . told them why it was important to buy and hold U. S. Savings Bonds.

"The figures on this sheet tell how the American people responded—and mighty good reading it makes.

"Once more, it has been clearly proved that when you give Americans the facts, you can then ask them for action—and *you'll get it!*"

What do the figures show?

On Mr. Snyder's sheet were some very interesting figures.

They showed that sales of Savings Bonds went from $494 million in last September to $519 million in October and kept climbing steadily until, in January of this year, they reached a new postwar high: **In January, 1947, Americans put nearly a billion dollars in Savings Bonds. And that trend is continuing.**

In the same way, redemptions have been going just as steadily downward. Here, too, the trend continues.

Moreover, there has been, since the first of the year, an increase not only in the volume of Bonds bought through Payroll Savings, but in the number of buyers.

How about you?

The figures show that millions of Americans have realized this fact: there is no safer, surer way on earth to get the things you want than by buying U. S. Savings Bonds regularly.

They are the safest investment in the world. Buy them regularly through the Payroll Plan, or ask your banker about the Bond-a-Month Plan.

Save the easy, automatic way—with U.S. Savings Bonds

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STRANGERS IN TOPOK

By JAMES W. ROUTH

COULD PAM uncover the secret of the shrouded past without turning the malicious forces she unleashed upon herself and the man she loved?

A TALL man in a yellow slicker, high-heeled boots and wide-brimmed hat swung from the step of the day coach next to the baggage car as the Westbound Limited creaked protestingly to a stop. The time was six minutes past midnight, which meant that the train was nearly four hours late. It wasn't raining at the moment, but the sky was densely overcast, the black air was heavy with moisture and a gusty wind swept across the wet planks of the landing platform. The scene was desolate and seemed deserted. Topok, a small Arizona town, wasn't a regular stop for this crack train and at that late hour even the depot was dark.

Striding briskly, carrying a shabby suitcase, Keith Denning was halfway along the side of the second sleeping car when he noticed that a porter had lifted several pieces of luggage out of the vestibule and that another passenger was getting off. This proved to be a woman, who stepped down lightly, dropped a tip into the porter's hand, and glanced around as if expecting someone to welcome her. Unconsciously, Denning slowed his stride. The porter slammed the vestibule door shut. The train

PAMELA HOLDEN KEITH DENNING

began to move. The woman turned and stooped to pick up a piece of her luggage. As she did so, a dark, fast form plunged out of the darkness behind her, and the next instant she was diving headlong across her luggage, over the edge of the platform, beneath the moving train.

Denning yelled, dropped his suitcase and sprang forward. His grabbing hand closed on a slender ankle. His bootheels chugged into a crack between two planks and he hauled back with all his strength, snaking the woman's writhing body up over the edge of the wet platform an instant before the wheels caught her. A violent yank landed her face down across one of her own traveling bags. The train rolled on, gathering speed, drowning out the sound of running feet. He flung a searching glance over his shoulder, but the rain-soaked darkness disclosed no sign of the woman's assailant. Shapely legs and a patch of something white met his downward glance. He lifted her to her feet.

"There you are, ma'am! That was close!"

His hands gripped her shoulders, steadying her. She wasn't very heavy, but her flesh was firm and there was strength in her slenderness. Her head, hatless now, reached slightly over his shoulder. The texture of her clothing and the scent of expensive perfume told him more than the darkness permitted him to see.

"I'll say it was!" she sputtered, shaking down her skirt. "You darn near killed me, you clumsy ox!"

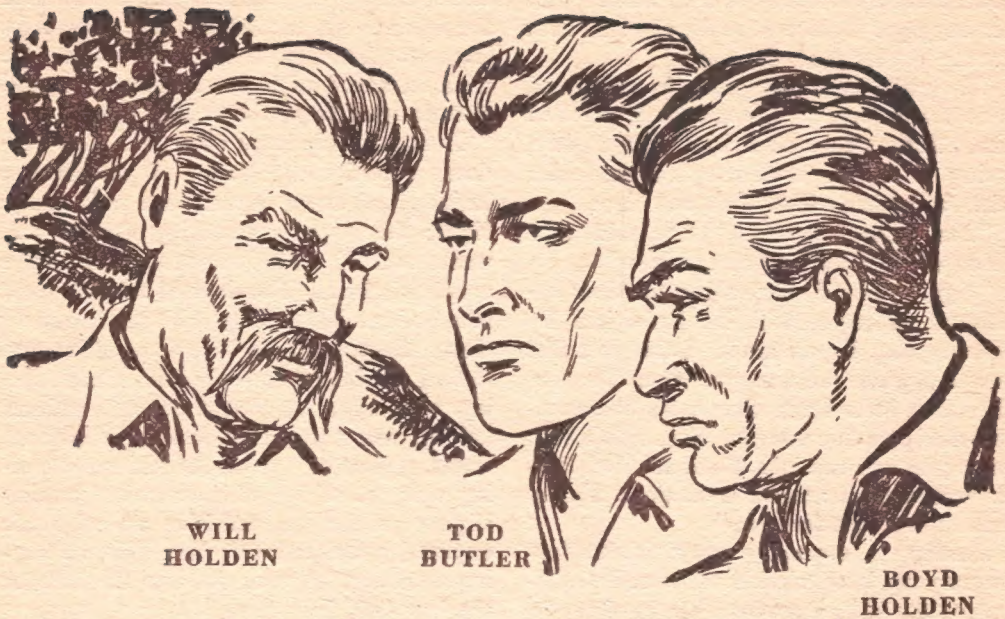
"*I* darned near killed you! Say—" He checked himself, realizing that under the circumstances her mistake was natural enough. "You give me too much credit," he concluded dryly.

She was standing clear of him now, but he sensed the tension that stiffened her slender body, saw the quick movement of her head and wished that he could see her face.

"You mean, it wasn't you who bumped into me?"

He considered swiftly. The picture in his mind was clear. Undoubtedly a deliberate attempt had been made to murder her. If he'd been the victim, he'd want to know about it.

"I mean nobody *bumped* into you," he said.



"But I certainly felt— Oh! You mean—"

The wail of the departing train filled in a moment of silence. A gust of wind brought a spatter of rain.

"I see," she said unsteadily. "Thank you." She held out her hand, looking up at him, her face a white blur in the darkness. "Words are such poor things! But I do thank you—for saving my life—for telling me."

Her grip was warm and strong for all that her hand was so small. He held it briefly, his awareness of her a disturbing thing, his curiosity keen. But the rain was coming down again.

"Can I help you to where you're going?" he asked.

She glanced around at the empty darkness, and he saw her shoulders move. "I thought someone would be here to meet me. Is there a hotel in this town?"

It seemed an odd question. "Should be," he said dryly. "I'll help you hunt for it."

Her face turned toward him quickly, but she didn't say anything. She did, however, insist upon carrying two of her three pieces of luggage, leaving him a large grip and his own suitcase. As soon as they rounded the end of the depot they saw two dim light blurs in the darkness, almost directly opposite each other, about a city block distant. The one on the far side of the wide muddy street guided them into the lobby of the Topok Hotel. It was raining hard when they tramped in, and the girl was breathless from hurrying. A paunchy oldster with tobacco-stained whiskers and an almost bald head blinked bleary eyes at them from behind the desk.

"Wondered why the Limited stopped," he wheezed. "Don't gen'lly. Welcome to Topok, folks. Finest little town in Arizony. You want twin beds or the bridal soot?"

Cackling, he slapped his hand down upon the register that lay open on the desk. Denning felt his ears burn, and the girl flushed hotly, but her swift glance told him that she was not lacking a sense of humor. It also told him that she was an extraordinarily pretty girl. The light of an unshaded electric bulb glistened on dark red hair that was something special.

"You've got your rope tangled, Pop," he drawled. "The lady and I aren't traveling together. I don't even know her name. She tripped over a plank on the depot platform," he added, noting the shrewdness with which the old man was eyeing the girl's wet and rumpled clothing and generally disheveled appearance. "No lights

down there and nobody to lend a hand with her baggage. This metropolis of yours isn't exactly on its toes, I'd say."

The girl's eyes, sea-green in color and attractively large and long-lashed, thanked him. They also looked him over swiftly, seeing a rangy, loose-muscled six-footer with a square, blunt-featured face.

"I'm Pamela Holden," she told him. "You've been awfully nice, Mr.—"

"Say!" the old man behind the desk exclaimed. "Are you Will Holden's girl? By Jehoshaphat, if you ain't! Look just like your ma when she was your age. Too bad about her, Miss Pam. She was a fine woman—a mighty fine woman. Say, didn't Will know you was comin'? Boyd an' Tod Butler was in town around noon time. Funny they didn't wait for you."

Denning momentarily was rigid, but fortunately the hotel clerk's outburst had distracted the girl's attention. By the time she had signed the register and handed him the pen, he had himself under control. He scrawled his name beneath her neat signature, noted that she gave her place of residence as New York City, and he wrote Fort Worth, Texas, under it. Meantime the old man had found room keys and was waddling around the end of the desk.

"I'm a couple of years younger than you are, Pop," Denning said. "Let me do the totin'. Which way is Miss Holden's room?"

Pop managed to look both relieved and knowing. "Number 2, to the left. You're in 6, at the other end of the hall. I'm obliged to you, Mister. My breathin' gets bad when I climb them danged stairs."

Pamela Holden, having taken a quick glance at the register, turned with a smile. "We'll manage. Mr. Denning is an expert at handling baggage."

"Might ask you for a reference sometime," Denning grinned.

SHE WENT ahead of him up the stairs and along the hall to the left. He liked the way she moved and the shape of her in her rumpled dark green traveling suit and the proud way she held her head. When they reached the door numbered 27, about midway between the stairs and the window at the end of the hall, he set down one of the bags he was carrying and twisted the knob as she turned the key. Dim light from the hall spilled into the room. He went in ahead of her and found the cord that dangled from the ceiling light.

It was a fairly large room with two windows opposite the door. A comfortable looking bed stood against the wall at the right; there was a matching dresser and washstand of imitation mahogany, and a couple of chairs. The door of a small closet stood ajar. Everything was immaculately clean. He went to one of the windows and looked out before lowering the shade, noting with approval that there was neither balcony nor porch roof between it and the street. When he turned, the girl was standing near the middle of the room, shivering slightly as she watched him, an enigmatic expression on her lovely face. Without saying anything, he went out into the hall for the bag he'd left there.

"Just put it in the corner by the window," she told him. "I won't need it tonight."

The bag disposed of, he faced her and took off his hat. She stood now with her back to the dresser and again, but more carefully than in the lobby, she looked him over. It was a peculiarly searching scrutiny that seemed to catalogue each individual feature—his dark brown hair, thick and wiry at the temples, waving back from a broad forehead that looked startlingly white in contrast to the deep tan of his lower face; steady pale grey eyes beneath heavy dark brows; strong blunt nose above a wide firm mouth; solid jaw and stubborn chin. She nodded slightly as if she approved of what she saw.

"It's very late," she said quietly, "and I've really got to get out of these wet clothes, but I'd like to talk to you, Mr. Denning."

There was a directness about her that pleased him. He knew just enough about her to be intrigued by these qualities. At the same time, he was strongly aware of her as one of the most disturbingly attractive girls he'd ever encountered.

"Suppose I smoke a cigaret while you slip on something dry," he suggested. "Will you come down to the lobby?"

She hesitated, looking at him with her strange green eyes slightly narrowed, her lips compressed. They were the kind of lips, even so, that gave a man ideas. After a moment they relaxed.

"I don't make a habit of it," she said, color rising in her cheeks. "But I'm sure you won't—misunderstand. I'd like to talk to you here, where we won't be overheard."

He nodded. "Will ten minutes or so be long enough?"

"Plenty, thanks."

OUTSIDE in the hall with the door closed, he paused to roll and light a cigaret. There was a feeling of warmth and excitement in him and an eagerness that he considered carefully. He was frowning when he went along the hall to the room assigned to him. Lightning has a way of striking without warning.

In his room, which was similar to but smaller than the one in which he'd left Pamela Holden, he hung his slicker in the closet, dropped the coat of his mail order serge suit on a chair, and opened his suitcase on the bed. A holstered revolver, wrapped up in a belt, lay on top of a pair of levis, a matching brush jacket, and a few other articles of clothing. He took it out and buckled the belt around his flat hips, adjusting it so that the long barreled gun lay snugly against his lean thigh. Then he poured water into the bowl, washed his hands and ran long fingers through his thick brown hair. Donning his coat again, he snapped off the light and let himself out into the hall.

His booted feet made scarcely a sound on the stairs. The lobby resounded to the snores of Pop, who sat in an armchair with his feet on the ledge of a window in a kind of alcove to the left of the deserted desk. No one else was visible. Rain beat upon the wooden awning above the entrance, and the rush of the wind and the damp smell of the storm came through the open door. The hands of the clock behind the desk stood at twelve twenty-five. For a few seconds Denning peered out into the rain-swept blackness. The saloon across the street, which had been lighted a few minutes ago, was now dark.

"Whoever it was," he thought, "isn't hanging around. She'll be safe enough. It was meant to look like an accident, but I guess that my being a witness upset some plans."

Wheeling, he sent another glance swiftly around the lobby. Pop snored on undisturbed. He went to the desk. The register contained the signatures of guests who had stopped at the hotel since the beginning of the calendar year. He carried it out of line with the entrance, thumbed backward two months and ran a long forefinger down a page. The finger paused beneath the signature of Thomas P. Carter, who had registered from Cheyenne, Wyoming, on February tenth. For a long moment Denning stood there, looking at that signature, squint creases deep around the corners of his slitted eyes, wide lips drawn thin. Then he turned the pages to the one that held his own signature beneath that of Pamela Holden and replaced the book where he had found it.

As he did this a sound, flat with distance, whipped out of the stormy night. Long strides carried him swiftly to the open door. The rain beat upon the wooden awning and the wind made a moaning sound as it swept through the sleeping town. If what he'd heard had been a gunshot, there was no second. He shook his head, wheeled and went silently up the stairs.

Pamela Holden looked very young and lovely in a padded silk robe with an oriental pattern. She had slippers on her small feet, and her dark red hair was combed back smoothly, falling loosely to her shoulders. There was warmth in her cheeks, excitement in her sea-green eyes and a hint of wariness, too.

"Please sit down," she murmured. "I had the porter fill my thermos bottle with hot coffee at supper time. Would you like some?"

"Fine," he said appreciatively.

She had drawn the room's only comfortable chair near the bed and gestured to it. The thermos bottle and two water glasses stood conveniently on a small stand, and she seated herself on the side of the bed to pour the coffee. There was some-

thing almost prim about the way she sat, with her feet close together and the robe fastened snugly about her. He knew that she was breaking every traditional convention to which she had been bred and trained, and the knowledge humbled him even as it whetted his curiosity. Silently he accepted the glass of steaming coffee she handed him.

"Smoke, if you like," she told him, smiling. "I don't care about it myself."

Tongue-tied by his awareness of her, sensitive to the taut nerves that lay behind her composure, he shook his head. Her strange green eyes studied him briefly. Then again she gave proof of her directness.

"It wasn't an accident, Mr. Denning, and I wasn't mistaken for someone else. Will you please tell me exactly what you saw? Who shoved me?"

He shook his head. "A man dressed in dark clothing, I'd say. But it happened too quickly for me to tell even if he was short or tall. You stooped. He shoved. I grabbed. When I looked for him, he was gone." He rubbed the side of his left thumb against his chin with a soft rasping sound. "Who would want to kill you, Miss Holden?"

Her hands were tightly clasped in her lap, and the color in her cheeks had gathered into two bright spots. "I—don't know. Oh, it's unbelievable!"

"MURDER is always unbelievable," he said quietly. "But there's always a reason for it, I reckon."

There was no color at all in her face now. Her eyes were wide and blank, looking at him but obviously not seeing him. Something in her own thought, some sudden realization, plainly had shocked her more than anything he had said. He waited, watching her, sipping his coffee. When he set the empty glass on the stand, that slight sound seemed to break the spell. Her strange eyes narrowed and for a moment studied him with a coolly impersonal and almost calculating detachment.

His square-jawed, brown-skinned face stiffened beneath that scrutiny. He was about to rise to his feet when her lips quirked and she leaned forward tensely.

"I owe you so much, Mr. Denning, that I hate to impose upon you. But I—" She hesitated and he was aware of the stiffness of her slender body beneath the padded robe. "Forgive me for being inquisitive," she went on more quietly. "You're also a stranger in Topok, aren't you?"

"First time I've been here," he nodded. Then he smiled and drawled, "Two strangers in Topok—sounds like a title for a book or a movie. How can I help you, Miss Holden?"

She took a quick breath, her firm young breasts rising against the padded robe. "You look like a—a cowboy—a cattleman. You look—" Unexpectedly her cheeks turned crimson and instead of completing what she had started to say, she asked hurriedly, "Are you here—on business? Or are you—free?"

It was oddly worded, but her embarrassment pleased him. He smiled. "Sort of prospectin' around. If there's anything I can do for you, I'll be glad to do it." Something caused him to add, softly, "You can trust me, Miss Holden."

For an instant she looked startled. "I'm sure I can!" Then she smiled crookedly and said, "Between us, we make it sound very melodramatic. But—well, I've never been shoved under a moving train before. I guess I'm not very brave. It—it scares me!"

"It was a close call," he said soberly. "I don't blame you for being scared."

She nodded and a shadow seemed to fall across her face, and for a long moment she sat with her head tilted forward, frowning at the toe of one of her slippers. He didn't blame her for being scared. He wondered if he should tell her what had brought him to Topok. If she knew, perhaps he could persuade her to catch an Eastbound train tomorrow without going out to the BCH ranch.

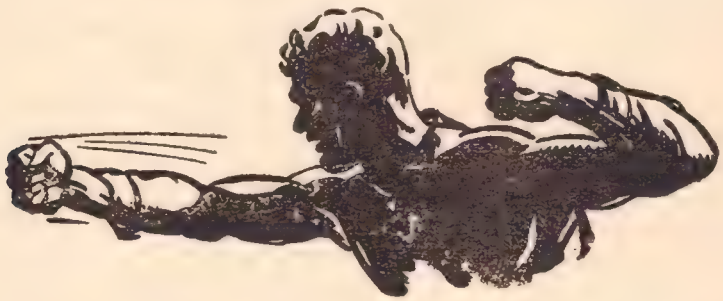
"What makes it worse," she said in a soft voice, "is that I've had a—a sort of premonition, ever since I started west. I kept telling myself it was imagination, but you see," she glanced at him quickly and then again looked at the toe of her slipper, "my mother died, after a long illness, about

four weeks ago. We were very close to each other. Losing her was—a terrible shock."

HE MURMURED sympathetically. She cleared the huskiness out of her voice, and what she told him next fitted in with some of the things he knew. Her parents had separated when she was nine years old, and since then she and her mother had lived in the East, always together even when she was at school and college.

"I haven't seen my father in nearly twelve years," she said. "I'll be twenty-one next month. And I can hardly remember the West."

She paused, her lips compressed, her eyes narrowed as her thought seemed to turn inward. It surprised him to learn that she was nearly twenty-one. She looked scarcely more than sixteen in that padded robe, with her hair loose about her shoulders.



"It wasn't until just before she died that mother told me about the BCH ranch," she continued. "Her maiden name was Bailey. Grandfather Bailey was one of the founders, and Grandfather Holden was one, too."

Denning was listening now with even closer attention. He knew about the BCH ranch, because the grandfather of his friend, Tom Carter, had also been one of the founders. Bailey, Carter and Holden had been pioneer cattlemen in Topok Valley. Partners in the old fashioned way peculiar to the West, what they'd owned, they'd owned jointly. Before they died, they'd drawn up a formal partnership agreement and executed identical wills making it binding upon their heirs, creating what in effect was a trust for their grandchildren. Will Holden, Pamela's father, had been designated executor-trustee and manager of the big ranch.

There were some peculiar angles to the setup. Tom Carter had discovered them when, six months ago, his father had died and he'd come into his inheritance. One of the angles was that the direct heirs of the original partners were prohibited from disposing of their shares in the estate, even by selling to each other. During their lifetimes they had to be content with splitting the net income between them. But the grandchildren of the three old timers—Tom Carter and Pamela Holden were the only ones—were not so bound; they could do as they liked—sell out, demand a liquidation and distribution of the entire estate, or continue to draw only the income. Another angle was that if either of the direct heirs died without issue, or if the issue should die before reaching the age of twenty-one, his or her share passed to the survivor.

"Mother never spoke of father," the girl was saying in her soft voice. "I have no idea why they separated and lived apart for so many years. But he must be a strange man."

On her death bed, Ellen Bailey Holden had told her daughter that now she, Pamela, would own the Bailey third of the BCH ranch, which had been the source of their means all those years. So, after Ellen died, Pam had written to her father for the first time. He'd replied immediately, offering to buy her interest in the ranch for a cash amount to be agreed upon between himself and anyone she might designate to represent her.

"It was a strange letter for a girl to receive from her father," Pam said. "So cold and—and formal. But—well, I thought how lonely he must have been all these years, so instead of writing to him again I decided to come and get acquainted with him."

Denning nodded. It seemed entirely natural to him that, in her new loneliness and sense of loss, she should have turned to her next of kin, the father who, after twelve years, was a stranger, but still her father. It would not have occurred to her that Will Holden might not want her.

"Didn't you let him know you were coming?"

"I sent him a telegram yesterday from the train. But he couldn't have got it."

TELEGRAMS have a way of reaching their destinations, and the old clerk downstairs had mentioned that a couple of men—Boyd and Tod Butler—had been in town from the BCH around noon. Denning didn't like the way this stacked up. It looked like a repetitive pattern. Tom Carter hadn't sent a telegram, of course, but a letter would serve the same purpose. How much should he tell Pamela Holden? He had a pretty good idea of what she was going to ask him to do. Maybe he could persuade her to take the morning train East.

"The storm could be responsible," she was saying. "Perhaps my telegram didn't get here until those two men went back to the ranch. I don't suppose messages are delivered out here as they are in a big city like New York."

"No," he agreed. "If they aren't picked up, they go in the mail." Then, quietly, he said, "We're getting off the trail, aren't we? What is it you wanted me to do, Miss Holden? If it's to represent you in selling your interest in the BCH to your father, you might be taking a big chance. You know nothing about me."

The direct way she looked at him indicated that she had already considered this. "You told me that I could trust you," she said. "And I believe I can. What happened at the depot makes me sure that something is terribly wrong out at the BCH! Perhaps whoever shoved me under the train thought that if I wasn't killed, I'd at least be so badly scared that I'd catch the first train back to New York. I am scared, but I'm not going to run away. I came here to see my father, and I'm going to see him. I'm also going to find out who tried to kill me, and why."

With her green eyes steadily upon him, she rose to her feet. Whatever else he might have thought of her, he was filled with admiration now. She was no fool, and while she was trembling with nervous tension and admitted that she was afraid, she had what in a man would be called guts.

"So you see," she concluded, "it isn't just business advice I want. It's something more. I want you to help me to stay alive!"

"What does the name Tom Carter mean to you, Miss Holden?" he asked quietly.

Surprise widened her eyes. "Why there's a Tom Carter whose grandfather was the third partner when the BCH was founded. But you—you told me your name was—"

"Keith Denning," he nodded. "Tom's my partner, Miss Holden. I think you'd better sit down while I tell you about him."

Something in his expression must have impressed her, for she sat down as abruptly as if her knees had given away. "What about him? Is he out at the BCH? If he is—"

He shook his head. "I don't know where he is. That's why I'm here. Two months ago, early in February, he left our ranch near Cheyenne and came down here to see about selling his share in the BCH. He signed the register downstairs on February tenth. I got one letter from him, postmarked here that same date. Two letters I sent him—one addressed to General Delivery and the other in care of Will Holden—came back. He disappeared somewhere between this town and the BCH."

"Disappeared!" she whispered, staring at him. There was no color in her face and her lips trembled as she pressed them together. "But, why? How could he disappear?"

"That's what I came to find out," he said grimly. "As to the why, I've got some ideas. But it's late now and you're plumb wore out." His glance softened as he looked down at her, and his voice became

gentle. "It makes us partners in this proposition, Miss Pam. You get some sleep and in the morning we'll work out a plan."

Again she stood up, a tired girl with nerves too tautly strung, looking at him in a strange way as she held out her hand and he took it in his bigger one.

"Goodnight, Keith," she murmured. "I've never much believed in fate, but I'm beginning to now!"

The impulse to take her into his arms and kiss her was almost irresistible, but deep within him something whispered that this was not the time. He lifted her hand to his lips and went out of the room, closing the door quietly behind him. In the hall he waited until he heard the key turn in the lock.

IT WAS a cool grey morning with a gale tearing through the town and clouds shifting about in the sky without giving the sun a chance to break through. Looking out of the window as he tucked the tail of his wool shirt in the levis with which he'd replaced his store clothing, Denning opined that the storm was not yet over and speculated upon the likelihood that it might keep anyone from coming in from the BCH that day. Then there was a knock at the door and he called, "Right with you!" thinking that Pamela must have got the jump on him. But when he opened the door, it wasn't the girl who stood there.

"You Denning?" queried a stockily built man with the badge of town marshal pinned to his chest. "Want to talk to you."

"You make early calls," Keith said dryly. "What's on your mind?"

"Name's Porter," the lawman stated, crowding past him into the room. "You came in on the Limited last night, did you?"

He had a tight-lipped, big-nosed face and shrewd hazel eyes that swept the room searchingly. Keith nodded, curbing his resentment of the way the man had barged in.

"You and Miss Holden," Porter went on gruffly. "I'll talk to her later. Who'd you see at the depot?"

At the other end of the hall a door closed, and the sound of footsteps caused a feeling of excitement to stir through Keith swiftly. But his mind was upon the marshal's question and another that had been in the background of his own thought since the night before.

"It was too dark to see much of anything," he replied. "Seemed queer that the station agent wasn't around, even if we were four hours late."

"He was around," Porter stated grimly. "Wasn't there no lights in the depot?"

Denning shook his head. "If the agent was around, neither Miss Holden nor I saw him."

"Good morning, Keith," said the girl herself. "I heard your voice and—oh, I'm so sorry!"

Framed in the open door, she made a picture worth any man's attention. She wore a khaki divided skirt and blouse, with riding boots on her feet and a silk scarf, whose color matched the green of her eyes, knotted loosely about her slender neck. Her heavy dark red hair was combed back and and drawn into a bun at the back of her head. She looked alert and rested, and it seemed to Keith that during the night she had changed from a frightened girl into a mature woman. He could not help regretting the change, although it made her none the less lovely and desirable.

"This is Town Marshal Porter, Miss Holden," he said quietly. "He wanted to know if we saw anyone at the depot last night. What did you mean, Porter, when you said that the station agent was around even if we didn't see him?"

PORTER had his hat off and was staring at Pam admiringly. The question brought his eyes around to Denning and he did not seem to like the change of view. He scowled, flicked another swift glance at Pam, and explained what he meant. It seemed that the Topok station agent had a helper who took the late trick as telegraph operator and kept the depot open until after the Limited had passed through. This morning, when Ed Keeley had opened up the depot at the regular hour, he'd taken one look and hustled off to find the town marshal.

"Whoever done it," Porter growled, "snuck up behind Bill Ward an' beat him

over the head with an iron bar or mebbe a gun barrel."

"Dead?" Keith asked.

"As he'll ever be."

"How awful!" Pam exclaimed in a tight voice. "The poor man!"

"Must of happened before the Limited come in," Porter said. "Depot was dark, you say. An' Tom wasn't on hand. Sure you didn't see nobody skulkin' around?"

Denning considered swiftly. He flung a quick glance at Pam, discovered that she was watching him, her eyes enormous in her white face. Obviously the murder of Tom Ward had been a forerunner to the attack upon her, but was anything to be gained by telling Porter of that attack? Neither of them could identify the man who had shoved her beneath the train.

"We didn't see anything that would help you, I'm afraid," Keith said quietly. "But I heard something that you might look into. After we'd registered and gone up to our rooms, I went down to the lobby to ask Pop if he had received any mail for me. He was asleep, so I didn't bother him. But I heard a gunshot—off north of town, I'd say. That was about twelve thirty-five."

"Huh!" snorted Porter. "Mebbe somebody took a shot at a coyote. Well, I'm obliged to you. And to you, Miss Holden." He smiled admiringly at Pam and added, "Too bad your train was so late, else you'd of caught Boyd an' Tod Butler before they left town. Your wire must of come in late, too. Bill Ward had it on his desk, ready to put in the BCH box at the post office this mornin'."

Pam seemed about to say something, but checked herself with a quick glance at Keith and moved aside to let Porter pass. The marshal clomped along the hall and started down the stairs.

"Keith!" Pam breathed unsteadily. "It gets worse and worse! But shouldn't we have told him?"

Keith shook his head. "It wouldn't help him and it might have got us tied up here. He could hold us for what they call material witnesses. But the material is mighty thin and I want to do some checking up. Likewise, the best thing for you to do is catch the first train back East."

"The best thing you can do," she retorted, "is get rid of that idea. I have no intention of going anywhere except to the BCH ranch."

She gave him a straight look that told him that no argument of his would induce her to change her mind.

"Got your ears laid back an' your hoofs planted solid, have you?" he drawled, smiling. "Well, I don't believe in arguing before breakfast. It tears a man down."

They ate in the hotel's dining room, at a small table near the window where they could talk without being overheard. The high wind whipped spatters of rain against the window as they were served, and he used this as an argument to persuade her to remain in town at the hotel, since she flatly refused to catch the Eastbound train, while he hired a car or a rig and went out to the BCH.

"I'll feel safer with you than alone here," she told him firmly. "And, after all, it's my father I'm going to see."

There was no answer to that. He had his own idea of how Will Holden would welcome her, but he could always bring her back to town. What he didn't like was having his own movements restricted by the obligation of safeguarding her against another possible attack upon her life.

OKAY," he surrendered. "But when we get out there, please don't say anything about Tom Carter. Not even to your father. Just introduce me as the man you fetched along to look the ranch over and advise you what to do about selling."

Something like a shadow brushed across her face. "Surely you don't think my father would—"

"What I'm thinking," he interposed quietly, "is that we can't afford to take any chances. I'm thinking that whoever tried to kill you last night did kill the night station agent, who might have been a witness, and fixed it to look as if the telegram you sent the day before yesterday didn't get through until last night. I'm thinking that whoever planned this, had a hand in Tom Carter's disappearance."

"But my own father!" Pam exclaimed

in a shocked voice. "Surely we can trust him!"

Denning didn't answer that. He lifted his coffee cup and drank from it, looking at her over the rim of it. Something flickered in her expressive eyes, and the color drained out of her cheeks. After a moment she said, "Marshal Porter spoke of two BCH men who were in town yesterday—Boyd and Tod Butler."

"The old-timer who gave us rooms last night mentioned them, too." Keith nodded. Then, an odd inflection in her voice registered its impression upon him, caused him to eye her narrowly. "You've been away so many years, I didn't suppose you knew them."

"I'm not sure," she murmured thoughtfully. "Boyd could be Boyd Holden, my father's younger brother. I remember him —vaguely."

Her vague memory could not be a pleasant one, he thought, judging by the way she frowned over it, but she added nothing to what she had said. They finished their breakfast in silence and were about to rise from the table when Marshal Porter appeared at the lobby door, located them and came hastily toward them.

"What time was it when you heard that gunshot?" he demanded abruptly of Keith.

Denning stood up, noting the baffled and angry expression in the lawman's face. "Twelve-thirty or close to it. What's up? Did you find the coyote that got shot? Must have a queer breed in this country, to be on the prowl on a stormy night like it was."

"Two-legged," Porter said gruffly. "Feller named Gabe Spears. Pete Morgan found him alongside the road just north of town, shot through the head. He ain't no great loss, but I'd like to know just what the hell's busted loose here! Two killin's in one night, when we ain't had none for over a year. Mebbe you better do some explainin', mister."

Keith didn't like the sound of that. He hoped Porter wasn't going to be unreasonable. He said quietly, "I've explained all I know. Maybe this Spears was wiped out by whoever killed the station agent last night. Maybe he saw the killer."

"Yeah," Porter growled. "Mebbe he did. Mebbe you—"

"How ridiculous!" Pam exclaimed. "Mr. Denning and I came in on the Limited, and we've told you that the depot was dark. You can check up on that easily. The porter mentioned it when he helped me get off with my baggage. And we came right here to the hotel and registered, which you can also check."

"Have," grunted the marshal. "But I dunno. Soon as you hit town, Denning, two men turn up dead. What's your business here?"

"It isn't wholesale murder," Keith retorted. "You're wastin' your time, Porter. Miss Holden is going out to the BCH to discuss with Will Holden an offer to buy out her interest in the ranch. She's hired me to advise her."

"That's right," the girl nodded. "We're driving out this morning."

Porter scowled and rubbed his chin. "All right," he acceded grumpily. "But I'm reportin' this to the sheriff, an' he might want to talk to you."

Then, wheeling abruptly, he stalked away. Denning grinned wryly down at Pam, murmuring, "The plot thickens. We better get out of town before he changes his mind and locks me up in his hoosegow."

"But you didn't have anything to do with those—those murders!"

"I made the mistake of telling him I heard a shot last night," Keith replied. "Seems like a man should be born with hobbles on his tongue. It would sure keep him out of a lot of trouble."

THEY left town an hour later in a used car Keith bought when it proved impossible to rent one. It wasn't much of a car, but it ran fairly well and the owner of the Topok Garage told him that the BCH ranch was a good forty miles north, along a graded but unpaved road, too great a distance to be traveled with any comfort on such a day in a horse drawn vehicle. He also said that this was the second car he'd sold recently to a man who wanted to drive out to the BCH.

"Made a deal with him, too, to buy it

back. But he must of changed his mind. I never saw him again. Mighty nice feller, he was. Name of—let's see—Carter, or something like. Said he came from Wyoming."

"Was this the car you sold him?" Denning asked, playing dumb.

"Hell, no!" The garage man, a lanky young fellow in greasy overalls, shook his head. "Like I said, I never saw him again. Anyhow that was a Ford coupe, good as new. Reckon he liked travelin' in it better'n in a train."

A car, Keith thought as he drove back to the hotel, wasn't as easy to dispose of as a horse, but it could be done. This was mountain country, with many a hidden canyon where a car could be driven over a cliff and demolished. If there had been any question in his mind regarding what had happened to his partner, there was none now. He told Pam what he'd learned, trying again to persuade her to let him go alone to the ranch, but she only gave him a strange look and said quietly that he was wasting his breath.

The gale had subsided a little from its early morning frenzy, but a drizzling rain had set in and there was a raw and penetrating chill to the air. The road began to climb as soon as they reached the outskirts of the town, and they entered a world of limited visibility, walled around by the grim and ghost-like shapes of trees and boulders, with the menacing shadows of the mountains in the background. It was a narrow road and the rain had softened its surface. He drove carefully, not trying to make time, disturbingly aware of the girl beside him, although there was little conversation between them.

"It's odd," she said, out of a long silence. "I feel as if I'd known you for years. But at this time yesterday, I didn't know that there was such a person as Keith Denning."

"Puts me one up on you," he drawled. "I knew there was a Pamela Holden."

The car speeded up a little as they crested a long rise and the road tipped down ahead of them. Yes, he'd known there was a Pamela Holden who, under the provisions of her grandfather's wills, would one day own two-thirds of the ranch house whose other third his partner had inherited and planned to sell. He'd kidded Tom Carter about that girl. What was the sense of working and worrying over the stocking of a new ranch when all he had to do was marry that girl and live easy the rest of his life? Denning's cheeks burned as he remembered this.

"What's the matter?" Pam asked lightly. "Don't I live up to your expectations, Keith?"

"Don't rush me," he murmured, grining. "I never did believe in snap judgments."

Abruptly his grin vanished and his lips thinned out. Ahead of them a crude barricade of brush, small boulders and what looked like a pole gate torn from a barb wire fence, blocked the road. The slope of the hill rose steeply to the left, dropped less steeply to the right. The moving shapes of men and horses loomed through the drizzle on either side of the barricade.

"Duck!" he snapped. "An' hang on!"

His foot went down hard on the gas pedal. The rear wheels spun in the mud, then the car leaped forward. Pam slid down onto the floor. A man yelled harshly. The wham of a gunshot cut through the roar of the motor and the rush of the wind. His squinting gaze on the end of the barricade, Denning shifted the wheel a trifle. The car swerved to the right. The left front fender caught barbed-wire and a hub cap jarred against the boulder. Horses reared and plunged frantically. There was a moment of pandemonium. The car struck something, bounced, seemed to rear up on its hind wheels and shake itself. Then it was back in the road, streaking away like a scared jack rabbit, followed by a single gunshot that went wild.

"All in one piece, Pam?" Keith asked anxiously, not daring to take his eyes off the road. "That was pretty rough."

"Are you telling me? I'll bet I've got the finest assortment of bruises in Arizona." She laughed ruefully as she slid up into the seat and laid her small hand over his big one on the wheel. "But I'm all right—and you got us through."

He didn't say anything. If a better spot

had been picked to stop them, he thought, they wouldn't have got through. He wished that this girl, with all her courage and her loveliness, had stayed in town or, better yet, gone back East. He wondered what kind of a welcome awaited them at the BCH ranch.

THE RANCH buildings stood on high ground at the north end of Topok Valley. Foothills jumbled up behind them, mounting in steep pine-clad slopes to the solid bulk of the mountain which thrust snow-capped peaks into the lowering sky. The eerie moaning of the wind in the pines rose above the sounds made by the car, and the drizzling rain enveloped the buildings in a grey and clammy shroud, blurring their outlines, lending them a desolate and vaguely menacing appearance. Pam moved a little closer to Keith and he sensed the tension and the uncertainty that was in her.

"What a dreary looking place! It doesn't look a bit familiar. Golly, Keith, I almost wish I hadn't come!"

He could have reminded her that she'd insisted upon coming against his desire and advice. Instead, he said: "If the sun was shining it would look different. You'll feel better once you're inside."

"Once I've met him," she murmured, so softly that he barely heard. "I wonder—"

What she wondered she kept to herself, but he understood that at least part of her uneasiness had to do with meeting the father she had not seen for twelve years. Not for the first time he wished he knew what had caused the break between Will Holden and his wife; why they had separated and lived apart so many years. Such things almost inevitably leave scars. He was vitally interested in the essential character of Will Holden, past and present. The reputation a man creates in the business world does not necessarily reflect the real man. Will Holden was reputedly a man who drove a hard shrewd bargain, but who was scrupulously honest.

But Tom disappeared after he left Topok, he said to himself. And last night two men were wiped out and somebody shoved Pam under that train. Denning shook his head slightly, his jaws hard set, studying the layout of buildings as they neared the front of the ranch house. It's all tied up with the old partnership agreement and the wills of the three old-timers, he thought. Nobody stands to gain, as far as I can see, except Holden. But would a man murder his own daughter?

"Doesn't seem to be anyone at home," Pam said in a small tight voice.

The car rolled slowly up onto the level where the buildings stood, solid and substantial now that the mist no longer obscured them, but somehow still grim and unfriendly. The wide porch of the huge ranch house seemed to scowl at them. The only sign of life was the curl of smoke that the high wind whipped away from the chimney of what apparently was the cook house.

"Since we aren't expected," Denning drawled, "we shouldn't count on a welcomin' committee. But I don't like to see a gal disappointed, so I'll see what I can stir up."

WITH THAT he pressed the horn button and braked to a stop at the foot of the front steps. The raucous blare blasted through the moaning of the pines and whipped away on the wind. He was out of the car, rounding the front of it to help Pam out when the house door opened. The man who came across the porch was one of the biggest men he had ever seen—a veritable giant who looked at least seven feet tall and was broad in proportion, yet who moved as lithely and stepped as lightly as a ballet dancer.

"What's the trouble, stranger?" the big man asked in a deep, rumbling voice. "Get lost in the storm?"

He looked down at Keith with frost grey eyes, deep set beneath bushy black brows. His features were bold and strong, and his broad face was deeply tanned, young-looking in spite of the gray in his thick black hair. Something inside of Denning drew tight and hard as he returned the steady searching stare of this man.

"If this is the BCH ranch," he said, "we aren't lost."

"This is the BCH," the big man rumbled.

The car door opened, and Pam looked

out. "You aren't my father," she said. "You must be Uncle Boyd."

She stepped out as she spoke, and it seemed to Denning that Boyd Holden's big body stiffened as if he'd been hit an unexpected blow. For a moment he stared down at the girl, his broad face as unreadable as a square of well-tanned leather. Pam stared back at him, chin up, head high, green eyes slightly narrowed. Then another man came out of the house and advanced across the porch, a man as big as Boyd Holden, with the same frost grey eyes and bold strong features, but with a grizzled mustache drooping over his firm mouth, and with thinning hair that was almost white. There was a look of weariness about this man, and a look of worry. His broad shoulders stooped a little and his face was deeply lined, almost haggard. He looked years older than Boyd.

"Father!" Pam cried softly. "Don't you —remember me?"

It was a strange thing, that meeting of father and daughter. Denning saw how they looked at each other, saw the stern weariness of Will Holden's broad face give way to an expression of startled unbelief. He saw the two of them move toward each other as if drawn by a powerful magnet until, with a gesture he would always remember, Pam lifted her small hands to her father's stooped shoulders and stood on tiptoe to kiss him, and with a muffled cry Will Holden hugged her close.

"Pam! Little Pam! Child, why didn't you let me know you were coming? I would have—"

"I did, Dad," the girl murmured. "I sent a telegram, but—"

"By the Lord, Will!" Boyd Holden rumbled. "She's the spittin' image of Ellen, ain't she? Got a kiss for me, too, chicken?"

"I see no reason for kissing you," Pam retorted coolly. "And my name, since you seem to have forgotten it, is Pamela!"

For an instant Boyd Holden stared. Then he tipped back his head and burst into a roar of laughter. "By the Lord! Will, you've bred a wildcat! Damned if you ain't! I'll try not to get the breeds mixed again, Miss Pamela!"

WATCHING alertly, Denning observed that Pam and her father weren't amused. The girl looked angry, but what interested him most was the troubled expression on Will Holden's face. Then he became aware that another man was now standing at the corner of the house, as if he'd come around from the rear and was silently taking in the scene. This was a tall slim young man in levis and brush jacket, with a wide-brimmed hat on his head and a holstered gun hugging each lean thigh. Before he had time to see more than this, Pam was introducing him to her father.

Denning shook hands with both of the big men. Then a gesture from Boyd brought the tall slim young man from the corner of the house. He turned out to be Tod Butler, BCH range boss. He also turned out to be a remarkably handsome man, with ash blond hair, cold blue eyes and features of a collar ad model.

"I hope you don't decide to sell, Miss Holden," he said, in a soft, almost purring voice. "It would be mighty nice if you'd stay with us."

"Made a conquest already, kitten," rumbled Boyd Holden. "And you could do worse. Tod's an all right man."

"I'll place your recommendation on file," Pam said coolly.

But she smiled at Butler in a friendly way, and Denning didn't like it. Only a gunslick would pack two weapons as Butler did, and he was instinctively distrustful of male beauties. Pam was a mixture of sophistication and innocence, with a warm-hearted impulsiveness in her that might on occasion get the better of her judgment. He didn't want her to get hurt. She was in for a rough enough time, he believed, without getting herself involved with a man like Tod Butler.

"It isn't because I'm jealous or likely to be," he thought grimly. "I've got a job to do corraling a killer, and there's three prime suspects right here. If it turns out that Will Holden is a scheming crook, she isn't going to like me for proving it."

His thinking, he realized, was somewhat confused. What he needed was to get off in a corner and straighten himself out.

Nothing must interfere with his reaching his objective. Pam appealed to him differently and more strongly than any girl had ever done, but this was no time to allow his emotions to get out of control. He'd need all his wits and judgment, if he was to get to the bottom of the plot that had resulted in Tom Carter's disappearance and the murder of two men and the attempted murder of Pam last night.

"What're we standin' out here for?" Boyd Holden rumbled. "Come inside, Denning. Lend him a hand with the baggage, Tod."

It would have suited Denning better to bunk in with the crew, but they would not listen to it. He was being accepted, it appeared, as a Texas cattleman whom Pam had known for some time.

The house was a huge rambling affair of many rooms, each of which opened out onto a roofed gallery. He carried Pam's luggage in, having the edge on Butler in that respect, and thus learned that she was to occupy the room she'd had as a child. It was a pleasant room, with two south facing windows.

"It's just as I remember it!" the girl exclaimed. "Nothing has been changed. Why, I don't believe it's been used since I went away! See, there's a doll I forgot. And how I cried!"

She picked the doll up and hugged it, her eyes shining with tears. Butler looked in at the door and smiled, a much too handsome man, much too sure of himself.

"It'll be nice havin' a lady in the house," he said. "The old man never has let anyone sleep in this room—or that one," he gestured toward the room adjoining the bathroom. Then, in a different tone, he said, "You're in the other wing, Denning. I'll show you."

"Obliged," Keith murmured and went out into the gallery, closing the door behind him on the girl who had come home.

ABSENTLY he noted, as he followed Butler around to the other wing, the cat-like way the other man moved, effortless, smoothly flowing as water. A dangerous man, he thought, a man who always knew what he wanted and never hesitated about going after it. A man who would have no scruples against making love to his boss's daughter, especially if she happened to own an independent third share in the ranch that hired him. What was the exact relationship between Tod Butler and Boyd Holden? It was a different relationship, than the one between Tod and Will Holden. The glance of an eye, the inflection of a voice, was enough to establish that.

"And this handsome gink is a killer if I ever saw one! Damn! I wish I'd come out here alone and struck for a riding job."

Butler opened a door and stood back to let him enter with his shabby suitcase. This was a smaller room than Pam's, with a single window facing east, but pleasant enough and furnished better than the run of ranch house rooms. He set the suitcase on the bed.

"This is fine," he said, looking at the man in the door.

"Come in on the Limited yesterday, did you?" Butler asked. "You an' Miss Pam. Too bad it was so late. Boyd an' I was in town earlier."

"So I heard."

"Could of saved you rentin' a car. Or did Gallager sell it to you?"

This plainly was leading up to something. Denning admitted that he'd bought the car. Butler rolled up a smoke in one deft motion and struck a match. The flame made his blue eyes look like polished agates.

"Have any trouble findin' your way out?"

"Followed the main road," Denning said. "No trouble about that."

Their eyes met and held together for a moment. Then the BCH range boss tipped his head and wheeled and went away, his boot heels clacking on the gallery's tiled floor.

PAM UNDRESSED slowly while water ran into the tub in the bathroom between her room and the one that had been her mother's. Like her own, her mother's room was exactly as she remembered it. It even seemed to her, when she opened the closet door, that the scent of

her mother's perfume lingered there. The strangeness of this impressed her strongly in spite of the new and poignant sense of loss that came to her.

The meeting with her father had proved much easier than she'd feared it would be. She'd remembered him as a grim stern man, towering over her and the mother to whose skirts she clung, an angry man saying angry words in his deep rumbling voice. That memory had almost caused her to turn back when she'd reached Chicago on her way West. She was glad now that she hadn't. As soon as she'd looked into his deeply lined face, she'd known that she'd done the right thing. She'd known that he was a tired and a troubled man, aged beyond his years, possibly ill, but above all a lonely man, ever since her mother left him.

Why did they separate? she wondered. It's strange that mother never would talk about him.

It was more than strange, for she and her mother had been very close to each other, more like sisters than mother and child. It was strange, too, that even on her death bed Ellen Holden had not suggested that Pam might return to the BCH ranch and her father. Yet Pam knew that Will Holden was truly glad to have her back. The way he'd taken her into his arms and hugged her left no room for doubt. Why, then, had he written that coldly formal letter, offering to buy her Bailey share of the ranch?

And who, she thought, frowning at the bruises on her legs as she pulled off her stockings, tried to kill me last night? And what about that business on the way out? Dad didn't know that I was coming. I'm as sure of that as I am that he loves me. He must never know that I suspected him of wanting me dead!

But someone had wanted her dead. Shoving her under the train couldn't have been an accident, and it couldn't have been that she'd been mistaken for someone else. No other passengers had got off the train. Just herself and Keith Denning. Could Keith have shoved her, and then changed his mind and dragged her back? She frowned more deeply over that. It was possible, of course. There might even be a motive, since if she died first, Tom Carter in due course would fall heir to the entire estate of their three grandfathers. Keith was Tom's partner, and he'd told her that they needed money to stock their Wyoming ranch. But he'd also claimed that Tom had disappeared somewhere between Topok and the BCH. If both she and Tom were out of the way, and if it could be proved that Tom died after she did, could Keith by any means benefit? She didn't know. There might be some legal angle that would enable him to claim Tom's inheritance along with the ranch they owned as partners.

But if he meant to kill me, she continued to herself, stepping into the tub, he must have changed his mind twice. Those men who had the road blocked meant business. They wore masks and they shot at us. And two men were killed in town last night. Darn it, I'm all mixed up!

She was indeed. And, slipping down into the warm water to soak her bruises, she became increasingly confused when she thought about Keith Denning. He was unlike any other man she'd ever met, and she'd met a lot of them in college and afterward. She'd even fancied herself in love with one or two. There was one, as a matter of fact who had kissed her goodbye at the station in New York and vowed that if she didn't return very soon he'd come after

"I've got to find out who tried to kill me. Please help me—to stay alive!"

her. But not even Ted Kennedy's kiss had made her heart behave in quite the way the mere touch of Keith Denning's strong hand did.

"Silly!" she murmured, sitting up and rubbing her face hard with the wash cloth. "He isn't interested in anything except finding out what happened to Tom Carter!"

SUDDENLY she was very still, sitting in the warm water, staring at the wash cloth but not seeing it. For another possibility had come to her, and it made her feel sick. Suppose Keith Denning had changed his mind twice? Suppose he'd hauled her out from under the train in obedience to an impulse which he'd subsequently regretted, and had planned to have her kidnapped on the road to the BCH and taken to wherever Tom Carter had already been taken. And suppose he'd changed his mind about that because he'd discovered that she was falling for him and had decided that marrying her would be the quickest and the surest way to get what he wanted! So he'd taken advantage of a ready made opportunity to play hero and now—

"Oh, golly!" Pam whispered. "I don't want to believe that!"

But there it was. Slowly and carefully and with unnecessary force she wrung out the wash cloth and hung it over the side of the tub. Then she stood up, reached for a towel, and began to dry herself, rubbing briskly where her assortment of bruises would permit.

Resolutely, as she found clean underthings and began to dress, she turned her thoughts away from Keith and considered instead something she had thus far deliberately avoided. It was almost a relief now to think about her father's younger brother. Her reluctance to do so before stemmed from the vague memory she'd mentioned to Keith, which even now refused to come clearly into focus. But it had to do also with the way she'd felt when she'd recognized him as he came across the porch, and with the revulsion that had choked her when he'd asked mockingly if she had a kiss for him, too. She had no great confidence in the infallibility of intuition, but in this case illusive memory supported intuition. She dropped a sheer silk slip over her head, twisted it down over her hips, and picked up her comb from the dresser.

"He's a lot younger than Dad," she thought, frowning into the mirror as she set to work on her hair. "And he looks younger than I'm sure he must be. I wonder why mother never mentioned him, either? There's so much she might have told me that I need to know! Such as why Grandfather Holden left Uncle Boyd out of his will and made Dad his sole heir."

Needing more light, she went to one of the windows to lift the shade, and stood for a moment, comb in hand, looking out into the ranch yard. Then she heard a soft click behind her and wheeled with a startled gasp.

"I didn't hear you knock—what are you doing here?"

"Come to have a little talk with you," Boyd Holden rumbled.

He stood with his back to the door whose closing click had startled her, and now he came toward her, stepping as lightly as a ballet dancer. There was an odd glint in his frost grey eyes and an odd smile on his broad ruddy face. He looked her up and down in a way that made her aware that she was between him and the window, clad only in that sheer silk slip. She snatched the padded robe from the bed and pulled it hastily around her. The big man chuckled softly.

"Ain't embarrassed, are you, kitten? No need to be. Not with your looks an' shape. By the Lord!" he said softly. "I thought Ellen had everything, but you're prettier'n she was—an' you've got more—"

"Get out!" Pam cried furiously. "Get out of my room!"

SHE STARTED past him toward the door, but ran into a powerful arm that stopped her as abruptly as if she'd run into a solid wall. And his big hands gripped her shoulders with just enough pressure to let her know that, strong as she was, she could not break that grip.

"Got more temper'n Ellen had, too," he rumbled. "That's the Holden in you. She

was stubborn as all git out, but there wasn't no fire in her. Now take it easy, kitten. I come to have a little talk with you."

Pam's temper seethed, but there was nothing she could do except scream and make a scene, which she didn't want to do. It was sure to have awkward consequences. Along with her explosive temper, there always had been in her a strangely contrary streak of cool reason. It asserted itself now. This man, no matter what else, was her uncle. He had come to tell her something privately, and the quicker he told it, the quicker she'd be rid of him and in possession of information that might be valuable.

"Say what you have to say and get out," she said coldly. "And be sure that I'll keep my door locked after this!"

His hands dropped from her shoulders. "Thought there must be a brain or two in that red head," he growled. "Who's this Denning?"

It wasn't what she'd expected. She experienced an inexplicable feeling of relief, and at the same time her alertness quickened. "I thought I made it clear. Dad said I should have someone advise me what my interest in the ranch is worth, so I—"

"Where'd you find him?"

Pam's lips tightened. There might be some confusion in her mind regarding Keith, but there was none regarding her uncle. Her instinctive distrust of him was stronger now than it had ever been. She lied deliberately. She said that Denning was a Texas cattleman who had been recommended to her by a mutual friend.

"So," Boyd Holden grunted, peering down at her shrewdly. "You wouldn't be in love with him, would you, kitten?"

To her dismay, Pam flushed hotly and that set off her temper again. "No, I wouldn't be in love with him!" she flared. "Besides, it's none of your business! And if this is what you came bursting into my room to talk about, you can get out—right now! I'm tired. I want to rest and finish dressing."

"Mighty pretty when you heat up," he rumbled placidly. "Somethin' else Ellen didn't have." Then, as she started again toward the door, he checked her again, growling. "Knowin' about Denning is important. You sure he's the man your friend recommended? You sure you've got a mutual friend?"

"I'm sure I've had more than enough of your silly questions!" she declared stormily. "Now will you please—"

"Not yet," he cut in gruffly. "Not till I've given you some advice. Get rid of Denning. Send him back to wherever he come from, tomorrow. Make up your mind to stay here. Will needs you, kitten. He's a sick man. I wanted him to ask you to come out here, when he wrote that letter to you after Ellen died. But he wouldn't. Said you'd had enough trouble an' grief. Mebbe he was right. But you're here, an' he's saw you. If you care two bits about him, you'll stick. He ain't got long to live. So get rid of Denning—pronto!"

The color drained out of Pam's cheeks, and a chill spread over her and a feeling of numbness. She was not aware that he had gone until she heard the door close. Then, stiffly, she sank down upon the edge of the bed. After a moment she twisted around with her face against the pillow.

"Oh, no!" she sobbed. "Oh, no! No!"

FOR A long time she huddled there before any reaction set in. Her father's appearance, the deep lines on his haggard face, the way his broad shoulders sagged, lent conviction to what her uncle had told her. He was ill and worried, and he needed her. Of course she'd stay. As a matter of fact, she had made up her mind to that the instant he'd taken her into his arms. Nevertheless, as her mind began to function again, she wondered why Boyd Holden had come and almost begged her to stay. That he had done so did not change her feeling of distrust, her instinctive dislike and suspicion of him. He'd also made a point of getting rid of Keith immediately.

She was puzzling over this, and trying again to clarify that vague but peculiarly disturbing memory of him that belonged to the period just preceding her parents' separation, when the sound of horses drew her to the window. Five men were riding into the ranch yard, pulling rein near the corrals. She had to stand at the side of

the window and peer out at an angle to see them dismount. They were cowboys, of course, and she wondered if any of them had been long enough at the ranch for her to remember them. They wore slickers and moved stiffly as if cold, which made her think of the vast difference between the romantic notions of her girl friends in the East and the harsh realities of ranch life. Then Tod Butler came into view and she noted the light and easy way he moved, and felt a slight stirring of her interest.

"There's another man who's different," she murmured. "He's much too good looking—and how well he knows it! I'll have to ask Dad about him."

Butler and one of the cowboys moved a little apart from the other four, who began stripping the gear off their horses. Then, as she was about to turn away, Keith Denning strolled past the window toward the group of men and horses. He, too, moved with the smooth and effortless ease of a giant cat, a tall, wide-shouldered, loose-muscled man at the sight of whom her heart gave a queer leap. Then, suddenly, her heart was lodged tightly in her throat, choking off her breath.

It was all over in a second or two at most. At one moment Tod Butler stood with his back toward the house, talking to a short bowlegged cowboy. At the next he was facing the approaching Denning, long legs well apart, elbows slightly bent. The other five men snapped to attention like soldiers responding to a command. Then Butler's left hand made a slight gesture, the angle went out of his elbows, and everything was normal again. Denning moved on without even the slightest hint of hesitation and halted near Tod and the bowlegged man. The other four men went back to their unsaddling.

Pam began to breathe again. Exactly what, she wondered irritably, had she thought might happen? She mustn't allow herself to get spooked, as the cowboys would say. She slipped out of her robe and set to work again, combing out her heavy dark red hair. A few moments later, she heard the sound of a car and looked out again as Keith drove past the window.

Four of the cowboys had disappeared, but Tod Butler and the short bowlegged man stood by while Denning backed his car into an empty shed. When he joined them, they all stood looking at the car and for the first time Pam noticed that the left front fender was badly dented.

"That was close!" she thought, and wondered how Keith would explain the damaged fender.

THE WAY I drive a car," Denning was saying, "I need to find a country where they grow rubber boulders, and teach their trees, fence posts and telegraph poles to duck."

"You did a good job of backin' into the shed," Tod Butler observed in his soft purring voice.

"Mebbe you should drive back'ards instead of for'ards," commented the bowlegged man, who had a cast in his right eye and a cynically twisted mouth. "That's a sad lookin' fender. Scratched up the body some, too, didn't you?"

"Looks like barbed-wire," Butler remarked thoughtfully. "Thought you said you got out here without no trouble."

"It's never no trouble to chase a boulder into a ditch," Denning drawled. "My trouble is missin' 'em."

The little man with the bad eye snorted and limped off toward the bunkhouse where the other four men had already gone. Denning's glance followed him. Like Butler, he packed two guns, and Tod had called him Cole. The other four remained nameless They also had stiffened up mighty quick at the sight of Keith, and he'd remarked the lack of any of the usual banter among them as they unsaddled.

"The old man is sick," he thought. "He's got two gunslicks riding for him, and a spooked crew. He's also got a brother that will bear watching. I wish Pam had stayed away from here."

He was on edge. From his first sight of the ranch buildings he'd had a feeling about the place. It was in the air, tension, brooding threat. Cole disappeared inside the bunkhouse, and Keith's glance shifted slowly over the other buildings, wondering exactly what gave him that queer feeling. This was a real ranch, a prosperous ranch

by every appearance. Had Tom Carter ever seen it?

"How does an expert go about puttin' a price on a ranch?"

Butler's gentle voice was mildly sarcastic. The glance of his hard blue eyes was level, but there was an opaqueness about the eyes themselves. Killer's eyes, Denning thought, and wondered again how such a man happened to be Will Holden's range boss. There was a closer kinship and, he suspected, a closer understanding between Boyd and Tod than between Tod and Pam's father. This was part of the queerness about the layout.

"They say an expert is just an ordinary damn fool a long way from home," he murmured, moving closer to the gear shed to gain its protection from the raw wind. "Maybe I can qualify that way. But don't rub it in, Butler. Back home, I'm only a cowboy lucky enough to own a fair to middlin' spread."

"Home bein' Texas, you said."

Butler also moved in closer to the shed, and they stood there facing each other with the antagonism between them an almost physical thing.

"There've been Dennings in Texas," Keith drawled, "since Ol' Sam Houston went to war with Santa Ana."

Butler considered this and the rolling of a cigarette. "Bein' an expert," he observed, striking a match and cupping the flame in the palm of his left hand, "I judge you do considerable travelin'."

"I've looked over a few hills."

"Ever been up in Wyoming?"

A knot jerked tight inside of Keith, but his blunt featured face showed nothing. "Pretty cold up there for a Texas man."

"So I've heard." Butler's soft voice had suddenly gone flat. "Get's cold around here, too, winters. This has been a late spring, but I reckon it ought to be all right for you to look the range over in a day or so."

ONLY then did Keith become aware of the man who had come up quietly behind him as he stood with his back toward the ranch house. Boyd Holden met his swift glance with a faintly sardonic smile which added nothing to his peace of mind. Not only had he allowed this big man, who stepped lightly even for a much smaller man, to approach him unnoticed, he had betrayed that he was startled.

"Getting acquainted, are you?" the big man rumbled. "Learn any business secrets, Tod?"

"He's plumb cagy," Butler replied. "Reckon I'll have to trail around with him to find out how he does his expertin'." He smiled thinly.

Boyd chuckled. "I'm afraid you're out of luck. I've been talking to my niece," he went on, looking steadily at Keith. "She's given up her idea of selling. You've had your trip out here for nothing."

Denning thought swiftly. Pam had agreed to stall along for a few days before committing herself one way or the other. She knew that he needed time to look around, and an excuse for being at the ranch. He didn't think she'd let him down. Holden must be lying.

"Well," he murmured, shrugging, "that's the way it goes. Folks change their minds. Might stick around for a day or two anyhow, though, if you don't mind. This is the first time I've been on this range."

The other men exchanged a swift glance. Then Boyd Holden nodded. "Fair enough. Want to take a look at our buildings and corrals? Then we'll go inside and have a drink before supper. There's just about time. Join us, Tod?"

"No, thanks," Butler said softly. "Got some washin' up to do."

With that he wheeled and walked away in that light and easy way he had. The big man grinned at Keith. "Bet you he puts on a high polish. Pam is a mighty pretty girl."

Something cold seemed to hit Denning in the pit of the stomach. An idea he didn't like began to shape up in his mind. He managed to smile and make an appropriately disinterested reply as he turned beside the big man and they began a tour of inspection.

This took a little time. He was more than puzzled at Boyd Holden's insistence that he go inside each building and explore it thoroughly. It was as if Boyd Holden

wanted to convince him that no skeletons or dead bodies were hidden at the BCH.

"That does it," Boyd rumbled at last. "Now we'll have that drink. What do you think of the layout, Denning?"

"It's as fine as any I've ever seen," Keith replied truthfully.

They walked across the yard toward the big adobe house in the early dusk. Overhead the sky was a mass of clouds, and the strong wind thrust against them and the moaning of the pines on the slopes of the foothills was a weird and lonely sound. Lighted windows were pale yellow blurs in the murky twilight.

"By the way," the big man said, "Pam told me that you met through a mutual friend. But I didn't catch the name."

It was time, Denning thought, to do a little backfiring. "Did she tell you about the two killings in Topok last night?" he asked. "Seems somebody slugged the station agent before the Limited got in, which was why the depot was dark. Marshal Porter was checking up on it this morning. Later on he told us that another man had been found with a bullet in him. He was plumb riled at having a crime wave on his hands."

"He would be," Boyd growled. "Night man at the station would be Wade. Who was the other one?"

"Let's see. Spears, I think, was what Porter called him. Gabe Spears. Know him?"

BOYD'S answer was a non-committal grunt. But the backfire had served its purpose—they had reached the house.

In the living room they found Will Holden standing with his back to the fire that roared up the chimney of the huge stone fireplace. Pam was curled up in a big arm chair close by, and at the sight of her Denning's heart stopped for an instant. She wore a simple frock of some soft, dark-green material, cut low to display her slender throat and the beginning swell of her breasts. Her dark red hair was piled high on her head, and she was the loveliest thing he had ever seen in his life. When her eyes met his, he saw the swift rise of color in her cheeks and his pulses throbbed from the eagerness that strained through him.

"Looks a heap like Ellen, doesn't she, Will?" Boyd rumbled. "Only I reckon she's even prettier."

"No woman could be prettier than Ellen was," Will Holden said in his deep, slow voice. "Not even her daughter."

In that moment the air in that big room seemed to become vibrant with suppressed hostility, as if in the quiet rumbling of their voices the two big men had brought to life a long quiescent conflict that was grim and deadly. A conflict, Denning sensed, which somehow had welded between them a bond that was stronger even than their kinship, a poisonous and destructive thing. He knew suddenly why Will Holden had not wanted Pamela to come home to the ranch.

"I'm glad you said that, Dad," the girl said quietly. "I'm glad you—"

"I brought Denning in for a drink," Boyd Holden growled. "Go right ahead being glad, kitten, but don't hold up important business. What'll it be, Denning? Will takes sherry. I'm a whisky man myself and can recommend the bourbon."

He was heavily jovial, but his rudeness irked Denning, who glanced at Pam. The girl spoke softly in a voice like ice dripping into a silver bowl.

"Thank you for interrupting me, Uncle Boyd. I'll be glad to have a glass of Dad's sherry. And I'll be even gladder when you stop forgetting my name."

Boyd grunted and looked at Denning, who disappointed him by saying that he'd have sherry, too. Pam smiled serenely, so cool and lovely that Keith hardly dared look at her. A soft-footed Chinese house boy brought the drinks, and presently called them to supper.

This was served in the cookhouse gallery where, in true western fashion crew, guests and owners all sat down together at a single long table. Tod Butler was on hand, resplendent in a blue silk shirt and crimson scarf, with his blond hair slicked down and his handsome face freshly shaven, shining with soap and smelling of bay rum. He managed somehow to sit beside Pam, with Denning across the table from the girl and Will and Boyd Holden at the opposite ends. It was an excellent meal, to which Keith did full justice in spite of the circumstances, not the least disturbing of which was the way Tod Butler played up to Pam and the way the girl seemed to enjoy it.

Will Holden had little to say, and merely toyed with his food. Boyd ate hugely, and seemed to be vastly amused at Tod's attentions to his niece. The cowboys were a silent lot, who bolted their food, each man leaving the table as soon as he had finished eating.

WHEN the meal was over Denning, to his surprise, found himself walking back to the living room beside Pam. Will and Boyd were ahead of them, and Tod Butler had disappeared without explanation. The girl touched his arm, walking slowly, so that her father and uncle entered the big room some distance ahead of them.

"Keith," she said softly, "something happened this afternoon. There isn't time to tell you about it now. But after it happened, I went to Dad and told him a few things. He's going to talk to us this evening—privately."

So she had broken her word, he thought, and didn't like it. But if the damage was done, it was done. He didn't say anything. Her fingers tightened on his arm, stopping him, and she stood close to him with the warmth and sweetness of her pressing against him, starting a quivering deep inside of him.

"We've got to trust each other, Keith," she murmured.

Her free hand lay lightly against his chest and her lovely face was a pale blur in the near darkness of the gallery. Then suddenly his arms were around her and she was clinging to him, reaching up to meet his kiss.

The soft scuff of a foot behind them broke the spell. They moved apart swiftly as Tod Butler came toward them.

Denning had never been so unsure of anything as he was of himself in that moment. Not only was he badly shaken by the impulse that had mastered him so unexpectedly, and by Pam's even more surprising response, but the last thing he'd wanted was for Tod Butler or Boyd Holden to discover that the relationship between the girl and himself was not strictly a business relationship. The idea that had begun to take shape in his mind out in the yard before supper made such a discovery highly dangerous. But the handsome gunslick gave no indication that he had seen anything out of the ordinary, or that it meant anything to him if he had. He joined them and they went on into the living room.

"It's been a long time since that piano's had a work out, Miss Pam," Tod said in his gentle voice, gesturing toward the old-fashioned grand piano. "Won't you play something?"

Will Holden had resumed his place with his back to the fire and was carefully stoking a pipe. His brother was looking over the bottles in the liquor cabinet. Everything seemed normal and ordinary—the after supper gathering of friendly people in a room designed and furnished for comfortable living.

"Go ahead, kitten," Boyd rumbled. "Tod ain't a bad hand at singin'. Let's have some music. How about some brandy, Denning? Join us, Will?"

"I'll just have my pipe," Will replied, his voice like an echo of his brother's. "Some of your mother's music is there, Pamela. I'd like to hear those old ballads again."

Boyd glanced around with that sardonic smile of his, and Denning instinctively stiffened, but the big man withheld the comment he apparently had been about to make. Pam smiled at her father, and her eyes touched Denning with a soft and radiant shyness in them as she turned and went to the piano which Butler was opening.

THERE followed an interlude that was forever memorable to Keith. Without affectation, Pam played and sang for them in a high clear voice of remarkable sweetness that laid a spell upon him. She seemed to be singing just for him, even when Tod Butler added a passable tenor to the choruses of some of the old ballads. But Tod remained silent, an almost rapt expression on his handsome face, while she sang *Love's Old Sweet Song* and *Mavourneen.* And then, at the last, she sang *Forgotten.* As the last sweet tone died away into the flutter of the flames in the fireplace, she sat with her hands in her lap and her red head tilted forward, and the stillness in the big room was like no other stillness had ever been.

Keith dared not look at her. But suddenly he found himself looking at Tod Butler, meeting the hard challenge of the man's cold blue eyes. Baleful eyes they were, opaque and unblinking. His hair roots stirred and a tingling ran along his spine, and the palms of his hands prickled. Then the silence was broken and the spell ended in the rumble of Boyd Holden's deep voice.

"Sob stuff, but pretty. You've got a sweet voice, kitten. Does better than Ellen did, don't you think, Will? That was one of Ellen's favorite songs, too. Remember how she used to sing for us, before—"

A queer choked sound came from Will Holden's throat, half-sob, half-moan. It lifted Pam to her feet and sent her swiftly to the white haired man who stood before the fireplace with a stricken look upon his lined and haggard face. And Will Holden took a single lurching step and his knees seemed to give way and his big frame sagged, even as the girl reached him. Her slim arms went about him, supporting him, and he braced himself with a visible effort of will. Keith, in the act of leaping to lend a hand, checked himself. He saw a glance flash between Butler and Boyd. Then the gunslick's cold eyes were upon him again, and Boyd Holden spoke gruffly.

"Better take a shot of that medicine you carry around with you, Will. By the Lord, if you are my own brother, you're a prime fool to let yourself get upset over a dead woman! Specially one who thought so little of you when she was alive that she walked out an' left you flat."

It was so callously brutal that Denning could hardly believe his ears. Pam twisted around, her green eyes blazing in her white, shocked face.

"What a hateful thing to say! You—you—"

The sardonic smile on Boyd's broad face seemed to infuriate her. She was a red-topped flame, leaping at him, striking at him. Her small hand caught him across the jaw with a solid smack that rocked his head. Nor was he quick enough to catch her as she swayed back. Then Will Holden hooked a big arm about her and the two big men faced each other and again the only sound in the room was the fluttering of the flames in the fireplace. And suddenly again the air seemed to vibrate with that grim and deadly feeling, stronger than hate, that ran between the brothers. It was a strange and terrible thing, beyond Denning's power even then to understand. But it sharpened his awareness of Tod Butler, who stood near the piano still, a thin expectant smile on his face.

"You had that coming, Boyd," Will Holden said quietly after a moment. "You've been at it a long time, haven't you? I'm just beginning to understand how long—and what you've done!"

KEITH could only guess at the meaning of this, but it made him acutely uncomfortable, like an interloper to whom a family skeleton has been unintentionally disclosed. Yet he sensed that it was important, that it had a direct bearing upon Tom Carter's disappearance, and upon the attempt to murder Pam before she reached the ranch.

"So!" Boyd Holden grunted. "Well, don't let your understandin'—whatever you mean by that—bring on another heart attack." He flicked another glance at Butler, then peered down at Pam, who stared back at him with her chin up and her head pressed back against her father's shoulder. "You'd better put a curb on that temper, kitten, else it'll get you into trouble. Too bad there wasn't a man around to take a

hand in your upbringin'. But maybe it ain't too late, yet."

"If you have any idea of trying," Pam retorted instantly, "you'd better get rid of it. You may be my uncle, but if you ever lay a hand on me—or enter my room again uninvited—I'll make you wish you hadn't!"

"So!" Boyd grunted again, and turned on his heel and went out of the room.

Butler closed the piano and looked questioningly at Keith, who looked back at him without expression. Pam turned within her father's arm, put one of her arms about his waist and murmured something under her breath.

"Good night, Tod," Will Holden said in his deep, rumbling voice. "Denning, I'd like to talk to you, if you aren't in a hurry to turn in."

"No hurry, sir," Keith murmured, noting with approval the flush that stained Butler's face at his curt dismissal.

But there was nothing, of course, that the gunslick could do. He said good night politely to Pam, tipped his head at Denning and went away. His boot heels clicked along the gallery's tiled floor until a door closed on the sound.

"Keith!" Pam cried sharply. "Help me!"

His leap was in time to catch Will Holden's sagging form. Between them, they managed to get the big man into a chair, where he slumped down, gasping for breath, his face the color of bread dough.

"Breast—pocket—" he choked.

Pam's fingers were swift. She seemed to know exactly what to do. From a small cardboard box with a label on it, she took an ampoule, broke it into her own handkerchief and held it near her father's nose. It seemed to Denning, who knew little of such things, that the effect was like magic. In a few minutes Holden was breathing fairly easily and the color was coming back into his face. Pam knelt beside him anxiously. Keith went across the room, looked out into the gallery, and closed the door.

When he came back, the girl was perched on the arm of her father's chair, her cheek against his thinning white hair, one of her small hands in Holden's gnarled fist.

"Hadn't you better turn in, sir?" he asked gently. "We can do our talking in the morning."

WILL HOLDEN shook his head. "It had better be tonight," he said. "I'll be all right now. I've had these spells on and off for several years. Never knew exactly why I kept fighting them, but I do now."

He rubbed the back of Pam's hand against his cheek. Keith turned abruptly and brought a chair from across the room. When he sat down in it he dared again to glance at Pam, and was surprised to see how well she had herself under control.

"You didn't like it when you thought I'd broken my word," she said quietly, "but I had to tell Dad part of the story. I told him what happened in town last night and on the road today. And I told him about Uncle Boyd coming to my room. But I didn't tell him who you really are, Keith."

Suddenly, then, her cheeks were crimson and her eyes were shy and a feeling of warmth and gladness spread through him swiftly.

"Perhaps you told me more than you realized, child," Will Holden said, with a slight smile. "At any rate, Denning, she made who and what you are very important. What happened here a few minutes ago increases that importance."

His frost grey eyes were keen and shrewd in spite of his obvious illness. They were honest eyes, the eyes of a father appraising a man in whom his daughter has evidenced great interest, the eyes of a man seeking another, younger man to carry on an unfinished job of vast importance.

"You know my name, sir," Keith said quietly. "What you don't know is that I'm Tom Carter's partner and that I came to Topok to find him."

"To find him!" Holden echoed. "Why come here to find him? When he wrote me about wanting to sell his interest, I invited him to come and talk it over—and that was the last I heard from him. Thought he'd changed his mind."

"He didn't," Keith said grimly. "He answered your letter, told you when to expect him. He registered at the Topok

Hotel on February tenth. My letters came back unclaimed."

The significance of it sank into the older man slowly. Surprise gave way to conviction. He sagged back in his chair, closing his eyes, and Keith glanced swiftly at Pam who slipped down on her knees and peered anxiously at her father.

"Dad! Please!"

"I'm all right, child." He looked again at Denning then, and Keith saw the fear in his eyes. "It's worse than I thought," he said heavily. "Much worse. For what I've done in my blind stubbornness, I'm willing to pay—I have paid! But it's got to stop there. Pam," he turned to the girl and laid his big hand on her red head gently, "I was afraid to have you come here, even when I knew only part of what I know now. But you came and now—somehow—we must get you out of here safely."

"I'll never leave you, Dad!" the girl exclaimed. "Never!"

Will Holden might not have heard. He looked at Denning.

"We'd best not wait even until morning. Will you drive my girl back to Topok tonight? Drive her back where she'll be safe, and get in touch with the sheriff and have him bring a posse out here as soon as the Lord will let him!"

"I won't go!" Pam cried. "I won't leave you here alone with—"

Will Holden smiled a strange smile. "I'll be safe enough, child. As long as you're alive and out of reach, my scheming brother has nothing to gain from my death. If you've read your grandfathers' wills and the partnership agreement, you'll understand."

Denning did understand. If Will Holden survived both his daughter and Tom Carter, the ranch in its entirety would be his and would pass, at his death, to his brother, as nearest of kin. This meant that as long as Pam lived and was safely out of reach, it would be highly important for Boyd Holden to keep his brother alive.

"I shouldn't have brought you out here, Pam," he said.

"If you hadn't," she retorted, "I'd have found some other way."

He smiled wryly. That was exactly what had made him yield to her insistence. He'd gambled on his ability to protect her if she came with him.

"You'd better get started at once," Will Holden said impatiently. "Go get ready, Pam. Put on your warmest clothes and heavy shoes. Then slip out quietly and walk down the road. We'll give her ten minutes, Denning. Then you go out and start your car. If anyone has anything to say, tell them Pam has decided not to sell and that you're going back to Texas."

DENNING doubted that it would be as easy as that. He rubbed his chin with the side of his left thumb as he got slowly to his feet. Pam stood up slowly, too, plainly not wanting to leave her father.

"How about the crew, sir?" Keith asked. "Couldn't we—"

"Since the doctor told me to take things easy," the sick man broke in, "I've left too much to Boyd. There isn't a hand—except Butler and Cole—who's been here longer than three months. Those two will back Boyd's play. The others can't be counted on. The only thing is to get Pam out of here."

Pam gave Keith a troubled glance, but when he looked down into her strange green eyes there suddenly was something else in them that made his heart leap. Then she went past him, touching his arm lightly with her fingers, and out of the room. He harkened to the quick clicking of her heels along the gallery, and heard the quiet rumble of Will Holden's voice.

"It happens that way sometimes. Like a bolt of lightning out of a clear sky. If a man only has sense enough to grab onto it—and hold tight!"

Denning drew a deep breath of wonderment. "I aim to hold tight, sir," he murmured.

"She's like her mother," the sick man went on gently. "But she's got the Holden temper in her, too, that'll take some managing. Get her out of this, son, and take care of her. Don't let anything ever come between you—not even your own brother, if you've got one."

"No, sir."

This, Keith thought, was the strangest

of all the strange things that had happened since he stepped off the train in Topok last night, less than twenty-four hours ago.

"A man pays for his follies," Will Holden went on, as if speaking to himself. "I've paid for mine. I rated my brother above my wife. Because we were blood kin, I thought it was my duty to make a man out of him when my own father gave it up as a bad job and disinherited him. Ellen didn't want me to bring him here, but I wouldn't listen to her. He made love to her, and I beat him with my fists until he got down on his knees and apologized. I should have run him out then, but I thought he meant it when he said he'd learned his lesson. So she left me and—" His head tipped forward on his chest. "We were too stubborn, and too proud," he mumbled. "Ellen—Ellen—"

His voice broke off and a sudden stab of fear stiffened Keith. But the old man's chest was rising and falling regularly. Keith went silently across to the gallery entrance and looked out into the darkness, straining his ears. He saw nothing, but a subdued mumbling of voices came from somewhere to his right. He waited there until Pam came back, dressed in the clothes she had worn from town.

She kissed her father and Denning went with her out the front door onto the porch, where he took her briefly into his arms and she clung to him and he kissed her gently.

"Then it's true?" she murmured, with her lips against his.

"Truer than true," he told her. "Now get along with you. I'll pick you up in about ten minutes and make love to you all the way to Topok!"

"Golly!" she whispered. "What a man! He makes love by the mile!"

Then she was gone, a slim shape vanishing into the darkness beneath the black sky.

Back inside, Keith spoke briefly to Will Holden, who summoned the Chinese houseboy and instructed him to bring Boyd and Tod Butler to the living room. A few minutes later, carrying his suitcase and with his gun buckled on, Keith made his way quietly across the ranch yard to the shed where he'd backed his car.

There were no lights in the bunkhouse and the only sound was the moaning of the pines and the rushing sound of the wind. Wishing he had a flashlight, he fumbled his way along the side of the car to locate the door. He wondered grimly what would happen when he started it, hoped grimly that it would start quickly. Then he found the door handle. As he twisted it, a blaze of light leaped up.

"Chasin' boulders off the road in the dark is plumb dangerous, Mr. Denning," said the holder of the flashlight. "Tod was wonderin' if you'd git the notion to try it."

PAM WALKED quickly along the crown of the muddy road. The darkness was so intense that she could hardly see her hand before her face, and the moaning of the pines was an eerie sound. When she glanced over her shoulder, the lights in the ranch house did not look very far away, yet it seemed to her that she'd been walking for hours. Her boots were heavy with mud, her feet felt like cakes of ice, and if she gave them half a chance her teeth chattered. She stumbled over something she could not see and stepped squarely into a puddle that splashed water up over her legs.

"Darn!" she sputtered.

But she kept on walking for what seemed another hour, but probably was no more than five minutes. Then she stopped and again looked back. The lights were farther away now. Far enough, perhaps. She strained her ears for the sound of Keith's car. Surely more than ten minutes had elapsed since she'd clung to him there on the porch. It made her warm to think of that. It took her breath away to remember how he'd kissed her that first time, in the gallery after supper. She'd wanted him to, of course, but she hadn't counted on it being quite that way. No man had ever kissed her like that. Nor, she knew, had she ever responded to any man's kiss as she had to Keith's. It removed instantly every least doubt in her mind that he was her man, that she belonged irrevocably to him.

"Hurry, darling!" she whispered into the darkness. "Hurry! Don't let anything happen to you. I couldn't bear it!"

Suddenly she was afraid, there in the

damp darkness with the moaning of the pines and the chill breath of the wind all around her. The man she loved and her father were back there. If anything should happen to either of them— The lights of a car flashed up suddenly between her and the house. Her heart leaped and eagerness strained through her. She started to run toward the car, but remembered and stopped and stood at the side of the road, waiting.

"All the way to Topok!" she thought. "All the way to Topok!"

The car came along at moderate pace, while her impatience fretted. She began to walk toward it slowly. The lights picked her up and she stopped again. It was Keith's car all right. It was barely moving when it came abreast of her, and the door swung open. She made a quick step, reaching out for a handhold. A hand clamped around her wrist and the car stopped.

"Bad night for a walk, ain't it, Miss Pam?" asked a soft, purring voice. "Get in. I'll drive you back home."

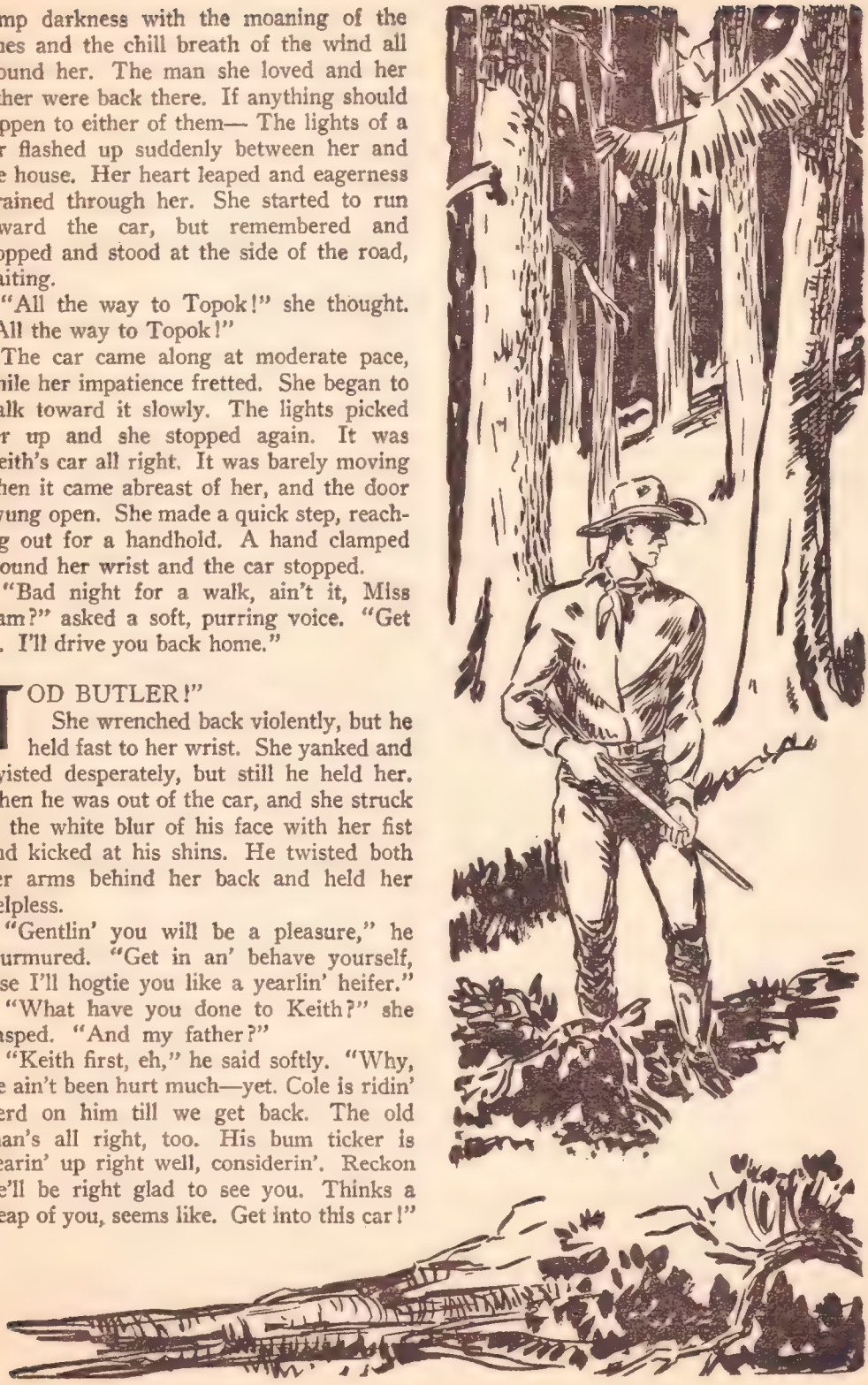
TOD BUTLER!"

She wrenched back violently, but he held fast to her wrist. She yanked and twisted desperately, but still he held her. Then he was out of the car, and she struck at the white blur of his face with her fist and kicked at his shins. He twisted both her arms behind her back and held her helpless.

"Gentlin' you will be a pleasure," he murmured. "Get in an' behave yourself, else I'll hogtie you like a yearlin' heifer."

"What have you done to Keith?" she gasped. "And my father?"

"Keith first, eh," he said softly. "Why, he ain't been hurt much—yet. Cole is ridin' herd on him till we get back. The old man's all right, too. His bum ticker is bearin' up right well, considerin'. Reckon he'll be right glad to see you. Thinks a heap of you, seems like. Get into this car!"



She got into the car. There was nothing else for her to do. She got in and sat quietly beside him while he backed and turned and drove back along the muddy road. It wasn't far when you weren't walking, but it was far enough to permit despair to take full possession of her. This silent man beside her was a killer, a murderer. Her uncle was worse than a murderer; he'd broken up her parents' marriage, and he'd schemed and plotted through the years to accomplish what now was as good as done.

Butler drove around the house into the yard at the rear, where he stopped the car and opened the door for her politely.

"They'll be waitin' for us in the living room," he said in his gentle voice.

She stepped out and looked about. The bunkhouse was unlighted. None of the crew seemed to be around, nor was there any sign of Keith and the man Tod Butler called Cole.

The big living room was almost as it had been earlier in the evening. The fire crackled and roared cheerfully in the big stone fireplace, before which now, however, Boyd Holden stood warming his back, while Will sat facing him in a big arm chair. Denning occupied another chair, to the right of the fireplace, back against the wall facing the length of the room. To his right, watching his every move, stood the bowlegged man with the cast in his eye and the cynically twisted mouth. Another sullen-faced man stood in the door that opened out onto the gallery. Keith's holster was empty, but he wasn't bound and he hadn't been hurt.

"If you're smart at all." Cole had told him out in the shed, "you won't argue. You'll lift that iron out of your holster an' toss it over to me easy-like. If you don't, I'll sure as hell separate your ideas from your disposition—permanent!"

"I'm in no shape to put up an argument," Keith had to admit. "But I'm curious. What's this all about? I came here to do a job for Miss Holden, but she's changed her mind so I'm pulling out for Texas."

"Couldn't think of lettin' you travel on a night like this," the bowlegged little gunslick replied. "Toss me that gun."

Keith might have taken a chance, but he knew it would be a losing one. So he lifted his gun carefully from its holster and tossed it onto the ground beneath the flashlight. Cole then ordered him to turn around and lift his hands, and marched him into the house. He and Will Holden had done their best to conceal the fact that Pam had left the house, hoping that she might somehow keep clear of the trap that had caught them, but Tod Butler had gone to her room to get her and Boyd Holden had been quick to figure out what had happened.

"Smart," he'd rumbled. "But not smart enough. What's your ante in this game, Denning?"

"My ante," he said, making it sound as

Coming in the next issue

GOLD DUST TRAIL

A Novel of Exciting Rangeland Mystery

By AUSTIN CORCORAN and MYRTLE JULIETTE COREY

if he was thoroughly disgusted, "is the five hundred bucks I was supposed to be paid for a job Miss Holden's changed her mind about. She said she'd pay me half of it if I'd drive her to Topok tonight."

"I think," Boyd growled, "you're lying. But it doesn't matter. You're in this, my friend, too deep to get out."

AFTER that there wasn't much talk. Butler drove away and now he was back and Pam was coming along the gallery, stepping through the door, blinking her green eyes against the sudden light. Something seemed to tighten about Keith's heart at the sight of her, pale and scared and spattered with mud. She looked straight at him as her vision cleared and a tinge of color came suddenly to her cheeks.

"Keith!"

That was all she said, but it was enough. It was, perhaps, too much. For as she darted from the door to her father's chair and knelt beside the sick man, Boyd Holden looked hard at Denning and then at Tod Butler. Butler's smile was a tight curling of the lips.

"I brought her back," he said in his gentle voice. "Now let's get down to cases, Boyd."

There was an odd sound to that, it seemed to Denning. It wasn't the way a hired hand spoke to his boss. He leaned forward a little, started to rise to his feet.

"Relax!" Cole warned softly.

The little gunslick stood with his feet planted solidly, the bow of his legs exaggerated, a wicked smile on his cynical mouth. Keith relaxed.

"We'll get down to cases," Boyd Holden rumbled. "It's been a long time coming, but this is it."

Huge and powerful he stood there before the fire, his broad face a trifle flushed, the play of the flames behind him exaggerating his bulk, gleaming on the polished handles of the guns with which he'd armed himself.

"Twenty years," he went on. "I've waited twenty years. It's that long, Will, since you got the old goat to cut me out of his will. It's that long since you married the woman that belonged to me!"

"You're lying, Boyd," the sick man broke in. "You were a no good scamp twenty years ago—a crooked gambler, a thief, and a woman chaser! That's why father washed his hands of you. As for Ellen—God help me, she was wiser than I! She knew I was wrong in thinking you'd go straight if I gave you a chance."

"Hold your jaw!" thundered Boyd. "I've took your mealy-mouthed talk too long. I've hated your guts all my life, damn you. You stole everything that was mine by rights, an' now, by the Lord, you'll pay for it! You—an' Ellen's brat!"

"I've already paid more than you know," Will Holden said sternly. "I'm ready to die. But if you've got a brain in your head, you'll not molest this child. She's known to be here. She'll be looked for. You can't get away with murdering her—as you did Tom Carter!"

Denning heard this, but he was watching Tod Butler. There was a thin smile on the gunslick's handsome face, a smile of contempt and rising impatience, a dangerous smile.

"We're wastin' time," Butler broke in now in his gentle voice. "You two beller at each other like a pair of old wind-broke bull buffalos. Get down to cases, Boyd. Never mind about how you hate the ol' gent's guts. Never mind about Tom Carter."

"Yes," rumbled Will Holden. "Get down to cases. It looks to me as if you had the bear by the tail. There's no profit in wholesale murder. The law is sure to move in."

"Mebbe this Denning is the law," squint-eyed Cole suggested. "I'm right curious about him, Tod."

"He ain't the law," Butler said softly. "He's Carter's pardner. I got curious a while ago an' checked up on him. His name was in Carter's wallet—to be notified in case anything happened to Carter. I never did get around to it!"

HIS MOCKING glance touched Denning, and returned immediately to the big man who stood before the crackling fire. A choked cry of horror came from Pam as the girl swayed to her feet

beside her father's chair. Keith did not look at her. He watched Butler. He had found his partner's murderer, but unless something like a miracle happened it would do him no good. He stood up slowly, disregarding Cole's warning mutter.

"Get on with it, Boyd," the handsome killer urged in his gentle voice. "We're wastin' time."

"You've wasted your share of it," growled Boyd. Then he stared down at his brother and went on. "You're wrong about me having the bear by the tail. I'm not that dumb. Tod and his boys are pulling out. They've been well paid and they've got a hideout where they won't be found. The girl goes with them. She was slated to die, but Denning messed that up and after Tod got a look at her, he wanted her. He'll take her and do what he likes with her. But there'll be proof to satisfy the law that she died in an accident—she and Denning—before they ever reached the BCH."

He spoke with gruff confidence that left no room for doubt as to the completeness of his plans. Denning dared not look at Pam, and the girl uttered no sound. Boyd Holden's rumbling voice became a snarl.

"There'll be proof that she died before you, damn you, Will! And I'll watch you choke and gasp and turn purple. I'll watch you die slow and hard, with none of that doctor's drug to help! By the Lord, I'll enjoy that!"

The deep voice ended. For a moment it seemed that the horrible hatred of the one brother for the other laid a kind of spell upon all who heard. No one moved. The only sound was the crackling roar of the fire. Then, suddenly, Pam was a streak of lancing flame, springing away from her father's side. Her red head struck Boyd Holden squarely in the stomach, knocking him backward, doubled up and grunting. Her small hand snatched at the grip of one of his guns even as Tod Butler, moving with almost equal speed, caught her from behind.

So much Denning saw as he wheeled and leaped and drove his fist at the point of Cole's jaw. The blow landed solidly. It lifted the bowlegged little killer off his feet, knocked him backward against the wall. Keith followed through with surging fury. A gun boomed behind him as he landed on the squint-eyed man's unconscious form. A bullet bored into the adobe wall above his head. His clawing hand ripped his own gun from Cole's belt. He rolled off to the left, came clear around as the man at the gallery door fired again. The slug tore through his hair. His answering shot caught the man just above the belt buckle.

KEITH!"

Pam's scream lifted above the thunder of the guns. His head jerked around and again instinctively he flung himself sideways. Flame streaked across his upper left arm. Across the room Tod Butler struck the girl a back-handed blow and leaped clear of her, landing crouched with a gun in each hand. The gun in Keith's hand jumped twice. A hot breath fanned his cheek. The thud of a heavy body striking the floor came as an echo of the shots, but the handsome gunslick stood for a long moment as if frozen. Then the guns dropped from his outstretched hands and he toppled slowly forward and fell across them.

Before the killer's body struck the floor, Keith was on his feet, wheeling alertly toward the fireplace. What he saw there froze him in turn. Will Holden gripped a heavy iron poker in his hand and stood staring down at the sprawling bulk of his brother.

Half an hour later, Keith stood alone on the porch, smoking a cigarette and watching the moonlight break through the scattering clouds. The wind was still blowing, but less strongly, and there was a scent of pine in the air and a stillness. The storm, he thought, was over.

"Both storms," he murmured. "But it sure looked bad for a while."

He shook his head, remembering how bad it had looked. And then his ear caught the sound of light footsteps in the living room, and a quivering started deep inside of him. He snapped his cigarette away and as the sparks scattered and died, Pam was beside him.

"He's asleep," she said in her clear sweet voice. "It's like a miracle. He says he's

changed his mind about dying. He's going to live until—" She stopped abruptly with a soft catching of her breath. Then she asked, "The other men made no trouble?"

"None whatever. They seemed glad the way it turned out. They're really cowhands—all but Cole and the one I shot. Cole talked some, too. Said the men who tried to stop us on our way out were Gabe Spears's men, hired to do the dirty work. He and Butler had known Spears for some years."

"Why was Spears killed?" the girl asked.

"Because he botched the job of train shoving he was supposed to do. Seems Boyd couldn't stand for a man to fall down on a job."

"Then Boyd—killed him?"

He hadn't wanted to tell her this, but she was bound to find it out sooner or later so perhaps it was just as well to get it over with.

"Boyd killed him," he said quietly. "But Butler killer Tom Carter."

A little moment of silence built up around them. She wasn't touching him, yet he could feel the warmth of her nearness and the quivering down inside of him was making it hard for him to breathe.

"My—uncle isn't—dead, is he?" she asked presently.

"No. I fixed up the cut on his head and left him tied to his bed, with Ling Wu ridin' herd on him."

It would have been better in some ways, he thought, if Boyd had been killed. But when she murmured that she was glad, he understood that, too. It was an ugly business all around, but she wouldn't want to remember that her father had killed his own brother.

Another moment of silence enveloped them. The moon sailed out into a wide patch of cloudless sky, transforming the bleak range and grim mountains into a kind of fairy land.

"We'd have had moonlight on our way to town," Pam said softly. "Not all the way, but part of the way to Topok." Without knowing how it happened she was in his arms.

"Golly!" she murmured after a long while, looking up at him with her slim arms about his neck. "It took you a long time, darling. I was afraid you'd changed your mind."

"Never!" he vowed, and kissed the soft hollow of her throat.

Her hand was soft and cool against his cheek. She laughed softly and snuggled her head against his shoulder.

"Do you know what Dad said when I kissed him goodnight? He said he was going to live to—to hold his grandchildren on his knee!" And then she whispered, "I'm shameless! Why, Mr. Denning, I've only known you twenty-four hours!"

There was only one way for him to answer that.

Coming in the next issue

TERROR RANGE

A voice called, "H'ist 'em!" and a big-eyed girl learned about the West—in a novelette by

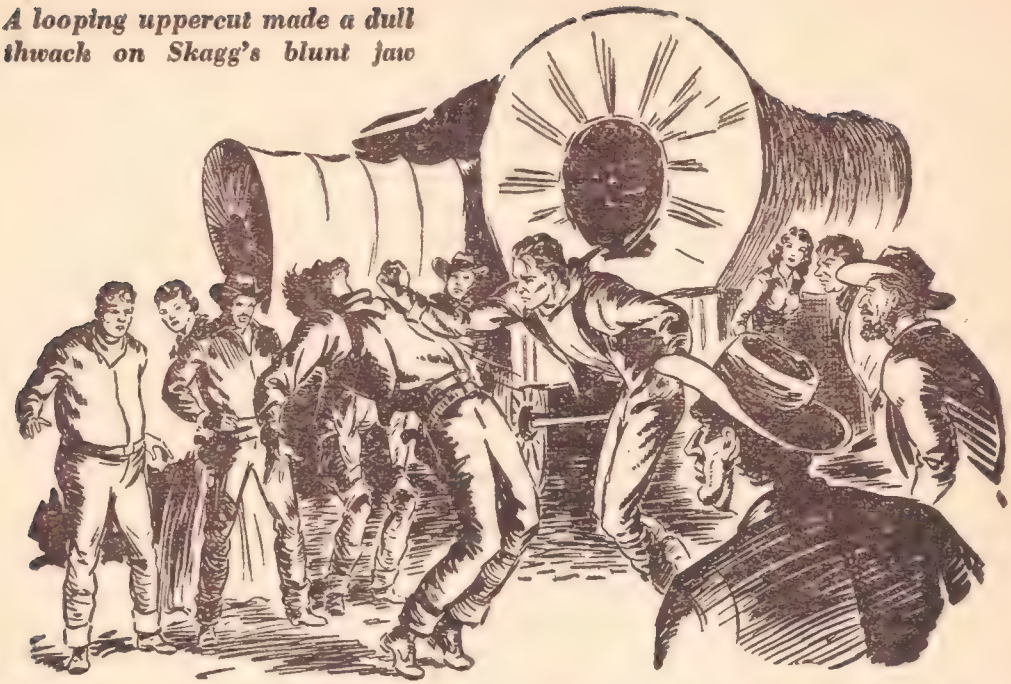
PAUL EVAN LEHMAN

POT HOOK JOHNSON

A true tale of an early West character—expert at cooking and mavericking—written by a man who knew him

COLONEL JACK POTTER

A looping uppercut made a dull thwack on Skagg's blunt jaw



FIGHTING NOLAND

By Giff Cheshire

CROWDED by an anger beyond his control, Dan Noland rounded the campfire. He put the flat of a hand on Skagg's broad shoulder and pulled him around. Skagg let go of Jennifer, who whirled into the shadows in embarrassment. Skagg drew his shoulders up, a deadly, half-pleased light glinting in his squinted eyes. When Dan's fist spat on his whiskery jaw, Skagg jerked back just enough to take the deadly shock out of it.

He grinned, moving back balancing, then bounded in. Even this early Dan knew what the end would be. It was their second fight, and the first time Skagg had beaten him pulpy and senseless. The gallery of a dozen uneasy eyes, whirling and surging in Dan's red-hazed vision, agreed with him.

Skagg's rock-like hard-driven fists hit Dan so swiftly and continually, Dan could do little more than cover up. He tried to close with Skagg. He heard a voice say,

DAN WAS frightened—not of the bully, Skagg, as people thought—but of building up a bitter memory that would forever haunt him. . . .

"Careful boy," but a frenzy of determination rendered him wholly reckless.

The whiskey reek of Skagg's breath was strong. Dan bent, shooting under Skagg's arms, getting his own wrapped around the man's barrel chest. With a surge of energy, he shoved Skagg backward. Then Skagg went down. Dan landed on top and, as Skagg tried to lift his head, Dan shoved it hard against the ground, again and again.

Skagg bowed his back, his knee slamming into Dan's groin. Nearly bucked loose, Dan held on. Skagg pulled him tight then and rolled, managing to turn over and

over. It was not until someone yelled sharply that Dan realized they were rolling toward the campfire.

Dan felt its heat before he recognized Skagg's intention. He squirmed on top again, the heat searing his face, the scattered coals close to him. With a tremendous heave, Skagg tried to roll Dan into them. There was a moment when they hung there, two nearly matched strengths, pitted in deadly fury against each other. Then Dan felt himself being twisted toward the fire. A surge of desperation pulled him out of Skagg's grasp.

Skagg dropped his deadly intention, scrambling to his feet, and Dan shoved up. Dan danced backward, getting his breath and his feet squarely under him. As Skagg drove in, Dan shot a savage punch to the man's mouth, rocking him. He heard Skagg's low, raging curse. All caution was dropped then. It became a matter of deadly, nearly matched hatreds. But the thin margin of superior strength and vicious skill was on Skagg's side.

A streaking right cross drive Dan to his knees, then Skagg kicked him, full in the face. Blackness swirled over Dan, his strength running out of him. He sagged to his elbows. Yet he looked up at Skagg, his eyes still unafraid, spitting animosity.

"Had enough?" Skagg demanded, in a heaving voice.

Dan knew that he was licked again, yet his answer was almost mild. "Skagg, you'll leave Jenny alone if I have to kill you."

Skagg's relish of these words seemed to make them a thing he had almost hoped for. "Hear that, men? He threatens to kill me." The men emitted a laugh, "Well, it's the only way he'll ever top Ike Skagg."

The gallery dispersed. There wasn't a man there who didn't hate Ike Skagg, but there wasn't one with the courage to intercede. Skagg was half drunk now, but even when sober he was a man to be reckoned with. He had proved that a dozen times since he and Joe Butler had joined the train back at the John Day River.

Dan got to his feet presently, rocked and ill by the punishment, yet a greater sickness was inside of him. Even his memory of what had started this was hazy for the moment. He recalled that Jenny had climbed into the wagon to get her sewing.

She had been standing on the lowered tongue, getting out, when Skagg came past. Skagg had reached and lifted her, letting her slide slowly down his body, her skirts hiking, and before he had released her, his arm had stayed for a moment, pressing her to him.

The relaxed group around Jim Holmes' fire had observed this, and in that instant Dan Noland had seen red. Dan turned now toward his own cart, knowing he had meant what he had just said. He would kill Ike Skagg if he had to, to keep the man's filthy hands off Jenny Holmes.

THE EMMIGRANT train was camped high in the Cascades on the Barlow Trail, waiting for good daylight to tackle the infamous Laurel Hill. There were twenty-two wagons, with men, women and children, a party that had stuck together since crossing the Big Muddy nearly three months before. No one came to Dan now to offer fellowship as he washed the blood from his face. They were afraid to show partiality, so well had Skagg cast his baleful spell upon them.

Ike Skagg and Joe Butler had ridden in to the immigrant camp back at the John Day crossing. They wore the beards and clothing of habitual outdoor men, yet they had offered no further information about themselves. They were traveling light, with only their saddlers and sparse equipment lashed to the cantles. The next morning, instead of riding on, they had dallied with the train, for some reason best known to themselves. Dan thought now that maybe it was because of him, for they had fought that night at the John Day, and Skagg had beaten him fiercely.

Skagg had been turned half beast by whiskey that night, also. Skagg and Butler had attached themselves to the Holmes party without being asked. Then, maybe because he saw the mutual liking between Jenny Holmes and Dan Noland, or maybe simply because it was the nature of the man, Skagg had tripped Dan as Dan passed before him with a plate of food.

Dan had been spent sprawling, the plate flying, and he had scrambled to his feet and jumped at Skagg.

The man had welcomed the fight with a bellow of delight, and he had beaten Dan to a bloody pulp. Strangely, the two were almost of a size, yet Ike Skagg had a cunning in his fighting that was beyond anything Dan had ever met. Skagg knew every dirty trick in the book, and he used them, as he had tonight.

There were steps behind Dan as he toweled, and he turned to see Jenny standing there. For a minute she did not speak. Then she said, "Thanks, Dan. He's a beast, and there's no use fighting a beast with bare hands."

Dan's reply was almost a growl. "I'll use a gun or a knife, if I have to."

Jenny drew a quick breath. "No, Dan, he'd kill you. I'd bet my life he's killed men before. Just stay clear of him till they get tired of it and go." She surprised him then by rising on her toes, placing her palms against his cheeks, drawing his head down, kissing him. She whirled and ran back toward her father's wagon. Dan gazed that way for a moment, remembering his first sight of her.

It had been something that, in the space of an indrawn breath, had changed his life. As he spread out his blankets for bed, Dan remembered his boyhood in the wild, early frontier fur capital of St. Louis. He had lost his father at ten, and his mother at fifteen, and after that he had been on his own in a town unnoted for human compassion.

IT WAS behind now, and Dan did not care to remember it closely. Yet images crowded into his mind. For a time he had done the odd work that a boy could do in St. Louis. There had been the year when he had worked on the keel boats on the upper Missouri. Then finally he had taken a job in John Storey's fur warehouse in the growing frontier town.

It had not been pleasant work, cleaning, sorting and baling fur of every description, from the Lake of the Woods, to the Snake River, to Santa Fé, yet it had fed and slept him, and an orphan on the frontier could ask for little more. For several years Dan had watched the wagons passing through for the prairies and beyond them to the vast opportunities reputedly on the West Coast.

It had interested him little. Then, one evening, going down the crowded street on his way home, he had seen the girl. He had halted in his tracks, staring across the street at her as she had made her way through the deep dust and stepped onto the far sidewalk.

There was no boldness in Dan Noland, but, keeping well behind yet always in sight, he had followed her to the edge of town and noted the camp she joined there. Dan's mind was made up. He had drawn his pay that day, and there was nothing to require his loyalty to the fur firm for which he worked. He had fixed and eaten his supper in his shack on the opposite side of town, then had made his way openly to what had turned out to be the camp of Jim Holmes.

Dan had liked the man at once. Holmes was a bantam of a man whose gentle eyes could turn instantly fierce. He had liked Dan. In addition to his wagon, he was taking some twenty milk cows to the Oregon country. Though not well fixed, he had agreed to take Dan in return for Dan's help, provided the lad furnished his own food. So Dan Noland had headed for the fabulous Oregon country, where land was free, where grass fed cattle all winter, where wheat, oats, barley and peas fairly sprang from the ground.

In those few days ambition flamed for the first time in his breast. There were only Jim Holmes and his daughter, and as the wagons traveled west, day by day, week after week, Dan's shyness left him gradually, and a warm friendship sprang up between him and Jenny.

When Dan told her at last how he had followed her and, in the winking of an eye, had decided to join them, Jenny had been pleased. And it had been wonderful and exciting until Ike Skagg and his partner had forced their way into the party at the John Day crossing.

Thinking of this as he fell asleep, Dan

knew that their next fight would be a matter of life or death.

The entire train was strangely quiet the next morning, strangely reserved, strangely tense. Yet the excitement and difficulty of the Laurel Hill stretch soon laid a cloak over the previous night's affair. There was a profuse growth of laurel shrub at this vicinity, which had given the long, steep descent its name.

Opened two years before, the Barlow Toll Road was well worn now. It was the first road passable by vehicles across the towering Cascade range. Prior to its opening, the emigrants taking the north fork at Fort Bridger had found themselves stopped in the vicinity of the Deschutes River by this range, and it had been necessary to take to rafts for a perilous passage down the twisting, high-bluffed gorge.

The Barlow route swung considerably left, passing south of towering, snowcapped Mount Hood. Laurel Hill was about two miles in length, and began some twelve to fourteen miles west of Barlow Pass. It was a perilous descent, with only three shelves where the ox drawn vehicles could stop the lumberng rush and rest.

The men in the train that Jim Holmes captained had felled fir trees the afternoon before, one for each vehicle. Now, one by one, these trees were fastened to the rear axles with ropes or chains, with the top foremost, to provide a crude brake, and one by one the wagons started down.

That morning Jim Holmes called Dan aside. "Dan, I tried to get the men in this outfit to organize to drive Skagg out. They're plain scared. Now I'm not a fighting man. I told him to leave, and he laughed at me. We'll be through in two-three days. We'll just have to put up with them."

Dan grinned at him. "You don't need to worry for my sake, Jim. It's Jenny. I just don't like her having to put up with that kind of thing."

Jim nodded, but work pressed, and the wagons moved out.

It was early afternoon before the last was down the hill. They were still in rough country. All through that day, Dan Noland's calm, quick-moving body failed to reveal what went on inside of him. To lend excuse to their loitering, Skagg and Butler helped put the wagons down the hill. Skagg's small eyes were on Dan often, and something burned in them.

Twice now he had beaten the younger man badly, but neither time had he broken him, and Ike Skagg was accustomed to breaking men. It seemed to fascinate him, holding him there, waiting, even anxious, to see how far he'd have to push this situation to reach the breaking point.

The tension in Dan Noland had grown greater. Never before had he been in a situation where he had contemplated killing a man. He found now that, whatever his hatred, the idea was abhorrent to him. As the day wore on, he saw why this was so.

ONCE, long ago, Dan had seen a man die. To his surprise, the memory of this though long buried, was suddenly vivid in his mind. It had happened on the outskirts of St. Louis. He had seen a man come hurriedly through the door of a deadfall. The man had worn dirty buckskins, and there had been pure fear in his face. Another man had followed, and the first had whirled to crouch behind the wheel of a wagon tied in the street. He'd had a gun in his hand, but it had given him no courage.

Calm, almost brutal, the other man had halted on the sidewalk, his legs spread, a gun in his hand. This man had cursed. "Stand up and take it, you—!" At last the cowering man had straightened and fired, but the shot had gone wide. The other gun had spoken, and Dan Noland, crouched between two buildings across the street, had seen the terrorized man slide limply down the wheel into the mud. The sight had been pitiful, and it had haunted Dan for days, until he'd willed it into the limbo of forgotten things. Now it was back in all its first vividness.

Dan Noland knew that he was not afraid to die. Yet it came to him for the first time that a man could fear killing as much as he could fear being killed. And now in his bitter hatred of Ike Skagg, Dan did not want to kill the man. He did not want to have that impression buried with the other

unpleasant thing in his memory. For this reason, Dan hoped that Skagg would lay off so that a decision would not have to be made.

They camped that night at the lower tollgate, their travel for that day having been but a few miles. This night Ike Skagg offered no further trouble, yet the tension in the train, which had diminished during the day's toil, was again apparent. The next day's travel put them across the Devil's Backbone, between the Sandy and Bull Run Rivers, a rough stretch that again posed difficulties for the wagons.

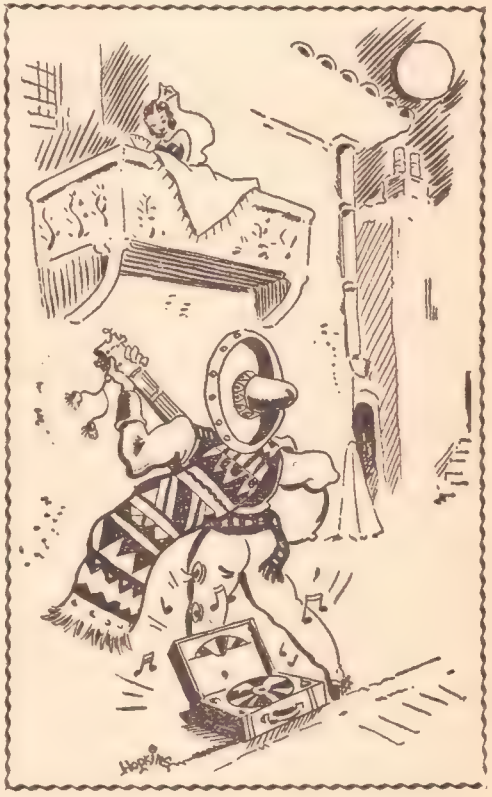
This night they camped in the hilly country west of the Sandy. As evening thickened, as cheerful campfires sprang up along the train, as bodies eased from the day's hard effort, it seemed to Dan for a time that the trouble might have blown over. A new elation rippled over the group when Jim Holmes announced that another day's long hard pull would be apt to put them to Oregon City, on the Willamette, which was their destination and where the train would break up, its members scattering to find and stake their homestead claims.

Dark came on, and somewhere a fiddle appeared, and the strains of merry music rocked through the woods. Then Dan learned in a moment of seeming eternity that Ike Skagg had not abandoned his little game.

Relaxed with the others, Dan saw Jenny come from the nearby undergrown woods. He saw that she had been running, but instantly, as she came in sight, she slowed to a casual walk. As she came up to the campfire, she tried to hold her features in repose, but there was a tightness to them and a glint in her eyes that made a prickling feeling run up Dan's spine.

She turned at once to the wagon, lifted herself lightly and disappeared beneath the canvas. In a moment Ike Skagg came out of the woods, and there was a grin on his bearded face. Dan had not been watching Skagg, supposing him to be at the far end of the train, whence the fiddling came. In one awful second, his mind gathered the full import of what had happened. Skagg had pounced on Jenny in the woods. Jenny had said nothing, not wanting to start trouble.

Dan lifted himself slowly to his feet, then hesitated. Boldly, as if he had planned that this last night should bring the final showdown between them, Ike Skagg strode toward Dan at the Holmes' fire. There was an easy insolence on his heavy features, a glint in his eye, and a small, scornful grin about his thick-lipped mouth. He heeled up at the edge of the fire and looked at Dan and waited. An eternal moment passed, but still Dan Noland said nothing.



SKAGG turned then and made his way on down toward the music. When he had gone Jenny came out of the wagon again. She looked at Dan searchingly but said nothing. Dan went to his own cart and sat there for a long while. Strangely, his hot violent anger had not returned. This time he had felt a cold sickness in his stomach as he remembered what his threat had been, as he realized that Skagg had called that threat, had demanded that it be backed up.

Dan Noland did not wear a gun, though he had one in his cart. In his days in wild and open country he had learned how to use it. And he knew that he had failed to challenge Skagg now, not because he feared to be killed but because of that fear that he could tell no one of having killed.

Dan knew the next morning that the news of what had happened had not been confined to the Holmes camp, for others nearby had seen and heard and pondered and spread the word. For the first time Dan found unsympathetic eyes turned toward him. These were decent men, but hard men, and to them a man did not talk of killing until he was ready to back his hand with all he had. Dan Noland, after taking two incredible beatings, had at last backed down. It seemed to them that Dan had acknowledged that he was broken, had admitted defeat.

Yet it broke the party's fascinated interest in the contest. It was finished, as far as they were concerned, but Dan Noland knew that it was far from finished.

Eager now to reach the end of the trail, they came to the Clackamas and followed it in a rough parallel until, in the end of the afternoon, they knew that they were close to the Willamette. They were shouting now, laughing, singing, and the strain and weariness of the trail abruptly fell away.

As they drew nearer to the town, Jim Holmes passed word that they would make their last camp a mile or so short of its outskirts. As the camp was formed, Ike Skagg and Butler rode up to Jim Holmes.

Skagg was relaxed now, certain that his victory was complete, leaving him satisfied. He said, "I'm riding into town, Jim, to buy a present for pretty Jenny. We'll be back."

"You needn't trouble," said Holmes.

Skagg laughed and wheeled his mount, and the pair of them pounded up the rutted trail.

Dan Noland watched them go, seeing in the same moment, the flitting disappointment in Jenny's eyes that she could not help feeling, could not completely conceal. Then she turned toward him quickly and smiled, as if regretting whatever had crossed her thoughts and trying to make it up to him. Yet Dan turned away, sick in his heart that he had let Skagg ride out.

Supper was not yet finished when the clatter of horses' hoofs sounded down the trail, and in a few moments Skagg and Butler whirled back into camp. It was immediately apparent that something had inflamed them. The big Skagg's eyes were burning, and he did not dismount, but sat in the saddle, looking at the men who watched him eagerly, anxious to communicate what he had inside of him, yet teasing them by waiting.

At last, with a grin, he said, "Men, we played the fools at Fort Bridger when we didn't take the California trail. They've found gold down there—lots of it. I heard it in town. A ship come up the river with the word that California's full of the stuff. They bought everything they could lay hands on to trade in the diggings. Men, I'm going to California. Who wants to go along?

It was Dan Noland's first experience with gold fever. He saw it kindling now, leaping to full flame in the space of a drawn breath, lighting men's eyes and their faces, firing their brains. Gold! And they had turned away from it toward Oregon, to a point a good six hundred miles north. They crowded around Ike Skagg, questioning him, listening to his excited answers. Here and there a man yelped, "It's me for California."

Of the entire group, Dan noticed, Jim Holmes was the only one who, though interested, seemed unmoved. Holmes shook his head. He had come to Oregon for land, and it was still land that he wanted. And it was only land that Dan Noland wanted, too.

A strange, almost animal tension was growing in Dan. His gaze settled again on Ike Skagg, and he knew that at any moment Skagg would wheel about and ride away for good. He knew that this new excitement had completely buried the memory of what had happened the night before, as far as the train was concerned. Perhaps it had buried it in Jenny's mind. Or perhaps she would feel nothing but relief at Skagg's going and would forget Dan's cowardice.

YET DAN Noland had not forgotten it. He saw in that moment that he would never forget it, any more than he had been able to forget the picture of the man who had died in the mud in St. Louis. He watched Skagg closely, and at last when he saw impatience mounting in the man's face and knew that he was about to ride, Dan said:

"Skagg, get down!"

Skagg jerked around, and his hand dropped instinctively to his gun.

Dan Noland was not armed. He stood there, his legs slightly spread, arms relaxed at his side, face calm, and again he said, "Get down, Skagg."

The onlookers pushed back. With a grin Ike Skagg whirled from the saddle and hit the ground. Again his eyes searched Dan's middle for a gun, and when he saw none he came forward, almost in a run. Dan Noland still did not know what the outcome would be. Twice he had met this man; twice he had been beaten within an inch of his life. Maybe he had learned something, maybe not. He walked to meet Skagg.

They fought in a whirl of dust. The gallery, twice formed in the last hundred fifty miles, formed again. Momentarily forgotten was the gold excitement, for a thing supposedly settled had flamed again. Now Dan brought to Skagg every trick he himself had suffered in the other fights. He kneed Skagg savagely, then drove him back by viciously slamming the top of his head against Skagg's mouth.

He tripped the man and, when Skagg went down, jumped on him with all his weight. A wariness came into Skagg's eyes, but he was not a man easily cowed. There were times when he stood solid, slugging it out, drawing fresh blood on Dan's battered face, rocking him, driving his sickening fists to Dan's belly. He kicked and bit, he drove out with splayed fingers for Dan's eyes. Yet elation began to grow in Dan Noland.

Through two brutal punishments he had paid high to learn this man's measure. He knew presently that he had it, for Skagg could not long withstand the type of punishment he was accustomed to deal out. Yet there was a fearful stamina in the man, and Dan knew that if he was to win it had to be fast.

He dropped caution, standing and slugging, fouling when he was fouled, and, at last, he saw fatigue taking some of the enormous strength out of Skagg's body. It was the one lift that Dan needed, and he redoubled efforts past what had once been the utmost of his strength. He centered a storm of chopping blows to Skagg's middle, changed pace abruptly and sent in a looping uppercut that made a dull thwack on Skagg's blunt jaw. He saw the man's eyes glaze seconds before Skagg went down, and when the big man landed in the dust it was to stay inert.

Dan Noland walked away from the crowd, not wanting to be on hand when Skagg at last dragged out. His elation died, and he felt little pride in what he had accomplished with Skagg. His satisfaction was in the fact that, though he would have been the only one ever to know it, there would be no shameful memory buried deep within himself. It was as if the gentle breeze had blown him clean.

Dan had washed his face at the river and was allowing the air to dry it slowly when he saw Jenny coming down the bank toward him. She had no words, but in her eyes was all he wanted to know from her, and he went to meet her.

LADIES' CHOICE

By S. Omar Barker

The bang of a gun and a couple of squeals was all it took to spook them two cowponies into a pitchin' panic

I WANT to tell you about a couple of crack-brained cowpokes and their scientific experiment in love and romance 'way back yonder when waddies was many and women few.

These two curly wolves was line-camp men, and they'd been holed up in the Badger Creek Boar's Nest for so long that they got the goojums, sometimes knowed as cabin fever. One had a guitar and the other a mandolin, which was mighty fine for a few weeks, with duets to beat hell 'most every evening. But after a while they got so sick of *Over the Waves* and *Hell Among the Yearlin's* that they begun accusing each other of playing off key on purpose.

Rather than let this grow into a shooting matter, they put their music machines away and took up two-handed pitch. That also got mighty boresome after while, so finally they took to just setting around of evenings, hating themselves and saying nothing. But not even a cabin-fevered cowpoke can set silent forever.

"What you an' me need, Butch," said Ed Watson, who was broad-built, bronzed, brawny and brown-eyed, "is to go courtin'."

"Courtin' what?" grunted Butch Duvaney, who was long, lean, leathery, blue-eyed and lonesome-looking. "You know damn well there ain't a human female within a hundred miles!"

"We could draw our time and go where there is some, couldn't we?"

"Where for instance? Them Longhorn City dance halls ain't got no lure for me."

"There's Squatter Valley, over the mountains," said Ed Watson. "Where there's homesteaders there's daughters—probably just a-waitin' for a couple of he-buckaroos like me an' you to come along an' court 'em!"

"Let 'em wait," shrugged Butch. "I've done been cured. All gals these days are lookin' for is some saphead with money."

"There you go!" snorted Ed. "Just because some go-to-hell gal out in Horny Toad, Arizona, throwed you over for some son of a rich mine owner, that ain't no sign they're all that away. Now you take a nice, quiet, red-elbowed nester's gal that's used to workin' for her vittle, an'—"

"Nice quiet hell!" busted in Butch, heaving his coffee cup through the window at a bluejay. "I tell you they're all the same!"

"An' I tell you they ain't! You take—"

"You take my hind foot!" cut in Butch. "Supposin' you an' me was sidlin' up to the same gal, an' one of us had a nice big ranch an' money in the bank, while the other 'un didn't have nothing but his horse an' saddle, which one do you reckon she'd pick out to marry?"

"That would depend," argued Ed, "on which one she was in love with."

"In a pig's eye! I'll bet you my saddle an' a hundred dollars against an Arbuckle's premium coupon that she'd choose the chump with a sackful of money, ever' damn time!"

For about a minute Ed Watson set there drumming his fingers on the plank table, a faraway, figgerin' look in his eyes. Then all of a sudden his jaw set forward a little, his fingers fisted up and gave the table a challenging thump.

"Cowboy," he said, "you've made yourself a bet! Where's a pencil an' some paper?"

NOT MANY days later two cowpokes rode into Squatter Valley. On the buckskin horse was a long, lank, lonesome-lookin' leather pounder with a guitar. On the bay was a broad-built, bronzed and brawny buckaroo with big,

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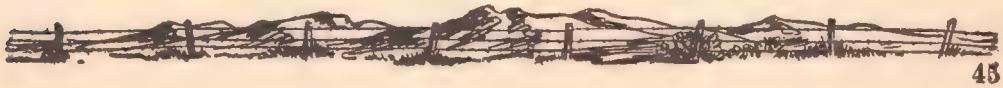
WHAT better invitation can a gal give to a contrary cowboy than a "Keep Out" sign? And two cowboys are twice as contrary as one



sentimental-lookin' brown eyes. He carried a mandolin.

They stopped at the first homesteader's dugout they come to and hallooed. A young woman come to the door with soapsuds on her hands.

"Howdy, ma'am," said Ed Watson, solemn as a Sioux. "Supposin' one of us has got money an' the other ain't: Which one would you rather marry?"

The girl's mouth sorter fell open, then she cocked her knuckles on her hips and her black eyes snapped.

"On your way, cowboys!" she said sharply. "You're two years too late!"

As they rode on, Ed and Butch heard a baby squalling inside the dugout. They come to a scrawny-whiskered little man taking his ease on the sunny side of a dugout, heckling a horny toad with occasional squirts of well aimed tobacco juice. Off yonder a big, rawboned woman was raising a dust trying to chouse a hog out of a plowed field.

"Howdy, mister," said Butch Duvaney gravely. "Supposin' a pore but honest cowboy should come lookin' for a wife around here?"

The nester give his head a jerk towards the woman chasing the hog. "Y'kin have mine," he drawled, "if y'kin ketch her!"

"Thanks," said Ed Watson. "But he means ain't you got any growed daughters?"

"Yeh-up. Two of 'em. Both married to fellers just as no 'count as I am."

"I see," said Butch Duvaney. "Did they marry for love or for money?"

"Money, I reckon. One feller had fifty cents an' the other 'un a dollar, but it wasn't no time a-tall till them gals had it all spent. Say, you fellers are sure 'nough cowboys, ain't you?"

"That's right. Why?"

"Well, they's a place on up the valley, they got a sign up 'Cowboys Keep Out.' Figgered maybe I ort to warn ye. Right peert lookin' gals, though, if you ain't scared of a shotgun. Say! If you want to watch a foot face, looky yonder!"

The cowboy were already watching, and it looked as if the red razorback hog heading for the brush was sure going to make it before the loping nester woman could head him off.

"Go it, Josie!" yelled the old man. "Cain't you even outrun a damn hog no more?"

The hog was now through a fence where Ed and Butch could ride to the rescue without climbing off, so they got there quick. Butch flipped a loop over the razorback's head, Ed's rope picked up a hind foot, and they jockeyed him back across the field into his pen. They expected the nester woman to be murderin' mad at her lazy husband, but if she was she didn't let on. Her face was raw-meat red and sweaty, but the smile she gave them looked mighty kind.

"I'm mighty grateful to you boys," she said. "Pa's an ol' honey, but he never was no hand to chouse pigs! Seem like I cain't run like I used to, myownself."

"I'll betcha there's one woman that never married for money," said Ed as they rode on up the Valley.

Butch never said nothing to that.

After while they came to a sign over a picket gate on a side road:

WARNING!
COWBOYS KEEP OUT
OUR SHOTGUN IS LOADED
Lydia, Louise, and Lorna Sims, Owners

"Here y'are, Ed," grinned Butch cheerfully. "Three nice, quiet, red-elbowed nester gals, no doubt just a-waitin' for a couple of he-buckaroos like me an' you to come along an' court 'em! Even got a sign out to make sure we won't give 'em the go-by!"

"Huh? That sign says 'Keep Out'! Can't you read?"

"Also between the lines," drawled Butch. "You ever hear of a better way to toll a cowboy in somewheres than to order him to keep out?"

"Yeah, I know, but—"

"'Lydia, Louise an' Lorna'—if them names ain't buckaroo bait put out to ketch some husband material, I'll eat a boot. Trouble is, these gals are liable to be old maids so anxious to grab a man that it won't give our noble experiment a fair

tryout. But you're the hero that hatched up this hen hunt, Ed. If you figger here's where we play Money-Money-Who's-Got-the-Money, I sure won't stand on your shirt tail!"

Ed Watson looked like he couldn't make up his mind. "Hell, there's three fillies in this pasture, Butch," he protested. "Our experiment don't need but one."

"Then you pick the one—an' I'll court her to beat hell, even if it is only to back up a bet. You goin' to open the gate or shall I?"

"Neither," said Ed. "It's padlocked!"

"More window dressin'," grinned Butch, stepping off his horse. "I'll bet the lock ain't even snapped shut!"

It wasn't. Looking sorter doubtful, Ed followed him through.

"I tell you what, Butch," he suggested, "we either got to make a mighty good first impression on these gals, or git run off. Git your guitar ready, an' we'll greet 'em with music!"

OVER THE next rise in a little cove they come onto a couple of weatherwalloped tents instead of a dugout. Nearby was the beginnings of a fair-sized new adobe house with walls already built up about eight feet, but no roof beams were visible.

Nearby to that was two slim, but healthy-lookin' bareheaded girls with their brown hickory pants rolled up above their knees, mixing adobe mud with their bare feet the way the Mexicans do. Their light brown hair was coiled up in braids on their heads, and the sunshine made it look like somebody had sprinkled gold dust on it. Their faces was round and rosy, without much way to tell one from the other except by the different mud spatters on 'em. Their eyes was bluebell blue, and looked somewhat surprised. If they wasn't twins, neither are two peanuts out of the same hull.

One started to roll down the bottoms of her overall legs, but quit when the other one pulled at her arm. Then they both went on tromping chopped straw into their sticky adobe mix. Even mud smear couldn't hide the fact that the shape of their underpinnings was by no means like broomsticks.

The cowboys' ponies spooked around some at all them piles of adobes, but Butch and Ed managed to gig them up to a stop about fifteen feet away. Here they gave their reins double dallies around the saddle horns.

"Now!" said Butch. He cut loose a chord on his guitar, and Ed's mandolin tinkled right in with that sentimental little old love song called *Wait for the Wagon.* They sure played it soft and sweet, considering how fidgety their ponies was. At first them two gals with the gold dust hair turned their backs, but purty soon Butch noticed their feet keeping time with the music as they tromped around and around in their mud vat, so he throwed his voice way up in his nose and made out like he was a square dance caller, making up words to suit the occasion:

"Two little doll babies, mud in their eye!
Big toe wiggle an' all step high!"

The next thing Butch knew, a well aimed gob of adobe mud smacked him square on the nose, and the serenade stopped.

Butch wasn't right sure, but it seemed to him that the gal who had throwed the mud was just a mite taller than the other one—and maybe a shade purtier.

"Now Lydia," he said, severe as a judge, "is that any way to act when two perfectly gentlemanly gentlemen come courtin'?"

"Courting my eye!" said the girl. "Besides, my name isn't Lydia."

"Mine is!" chirped a bird-like voice from the open flap of the nearest tent. "An' this here implement is a shotgun—loaded, cocked an' ready to bang!"

The cowboys stared at the sparrow-built little gray-haired lady in neat, clean calico like they thought she was an apparition.

"Gran'ma," said Butch dryly, "if you shoot off that go-bang holdin' it loose that away against your stummick, it'll kick you into the middle of next week!"

"I ain't a gran'ma," retorted Lydia

without shiftlng the shoot-bang. "An' I ain't aimin' to be no time soon. I'm the she-wolf mother of these two little gals that's tryin' to build us a decent house, an' I won't have no no'count cowboys pesterin' 'em. I'd have got out here sooner if I hadn't been a-changin' my dress. Now git!"

"Saw us comin' an' wanted to be sure an' look purty for the menfolks, huh?" grinned Butch. "Well, you sure done a job of it! Ain't she the purtiest little lady you ever looked at, Ed?"

"Git!" said Mrs. Lydia Simms again.

WITH that ol' two-holed bang-shooter pointing just about between the front legs of his bay pony, Ed Watson's round, cheerful face looked plumb uneasy.

"Hold on a minute, Mrs. Simms!" he said earnestly. "Layin' 'dobes is mighty heavy work for women. Butch an' me have got a couple of weeks off from the ranch. Whyn't you let us take over this house buildin' job for you?"

"Git!" said Mrs. Simms once more, only maybe not quite so frosty as she was before.

Then, whether she done it a-purpose or accidental, all of a sudden the shotgun went off. What it done from the butt end was kick the old lady plumb back into the tent. From the front end it throwed a load of birdshot into the ground right under the nose of Ed Watson's horse. At the same instant somebody throwed a gob of mud that hit Butch Duvaney's buckskin right at the root of his tail.

Both these items, along with the bang of the gun and a couple of squeals out of Louise and Lorna Simms, was all it took to spook them two cowponies into a rearin', plungin', pitchin' panic. As Butch Duvaney tried to yank his buckskin's head around and spur him out of there, the bronc's rump umphity-bumped into one of them new adobe walls.

Now until the mud mortar has had time to dry and set, even the best laid adobe toppling over like the walls of Jericho, showering its top layer of hard, twenty-pound, dried-mud bricks all over both them cowboys, their music instruments and their broncs.

That would have been a good time for both them horses to take to the open country, but you never can tell what a spooked bronc will do, once he lets in to pitch. While the bucking of Ed Watson's bay was knocking over the rest of the front wall and scattering adobes all over the place, Butch Duvaney's buckskin backed into the narrow alley between the new house and a tent, hung a foot in a peg-rope, throwed both himself and rider wham against the west side-wall and toppled it. Now half a ton of tumbling adobes don't do a tent no good—and the same goes for a man. But the only way you can kill a cowboy is to chop off his head and hide it from him.

BUTCH DUVANEY come back out of dreamland to find Ed Watson and them three Simms women digging him out from under a big pile of busted adobes.

"Oh, gosh!" he heard one of the girls say. "I sure hope he isn't killed!"

To prove he wasn't, Butch managed to wiggle one arm free, reach out and grabbed hold of a bare ankle.

"Which one are you?" he inquired. "Louise or Lorna?"

"If it's any of your business," retorted girl trying unsuccessfully to pull her foot free. "I'm Lorna."

"Lorna," said Butch, "will you marry me?"

"No!" said Lorna. "Let go of my foot!"

Butch held on. "Not even," he said, "if I'm goin' to inherit a big ranch and money in the bank?"

"Don't be silly!" said Lorna. This time she jerked her foot loose from his grasp. Butch noticed that his other arm had begun to hurt like hell.

"Pore boy!" chirped the old lady. "He's out of his head!"

"He's an idiot!" said Lorna. "They're both idiots! Look what they did!"

"It was an accident," said a softer, kinder timid voice that must have been Louise. "They didn't mean to."

"We sure didn't!" said Ed Watson earnestly. "What's more, quick as we can fetch us a camp, we'll stay right here till we git it all rebuilt for you!"

Butch made it to his feet.

"Ladies," he said, "my name's Butch Duvaney, this is my cousin, Ed Watson, and I'm sure you're glad to meet us."

"We're not," said Lorna. "Look at our new house!"

Butch looked at it, and it was sure a mess. "Think nothin' of it. Like Ed says, as soon as we can fetch us a camp—"

"I reckon we can board you an' loan you a couple of quilts," broke in Mrs. Simms. "I expect you've slept outdoors before. Besides, I know you cowboys. Once ever you go to fetch your camp, chances is you won't never come back."

"Lydia," said Butch, "either you don't realize what purty twin daughters you've got, or else you sure don't know cowboys!"

"I know I've still got a shotgun," said the old lady. "You boys can stay an' repair your damage if you're a-mind to, but I warn you right now—there won't be no courtin'!"

"Ed," said Butch, "don't you reckon now's as good a time as any to show 'em Uncle Sockfoot's letter?"

"Well, I dunno," said Ed. "Looks to me like we've done pried up all the hell we've got props for around here already!"

Butch could see that Ed was looking at one of the gals in a way that no cowpoke ever looked at a fence post. Also that the twin Ed couldn't seem to keep his eyes off of was slightly smaller and not quite as purty as her sister, but a darn sight more shy and timid. Since the old lady was Lydia and the other gal Lorna, he figgered this one was bound to be Louise.

"Louise," he said, "other things bein' equal, which will you choose to marry?"

Louise's blush ran all the way up to the hair roots, but it was Lorna that answered:

"You might as well get this straight, Long Stuff. Louise isn't going to marry you, Ed Watson nor any other no account cowboy—any more than I am. We're twins, and we're going to stick together as long as we live! Aren't we, Leeze?"

LOUISE nodded vigorously, but her eyes was staring anxiously at Butch's left arm.

"Look, Mom! This one's hurt! His arm's bleeding!"

"Well, anyhow my heart ain't," shrugged Butch with a wide grin. "The fact is we ain't no more interested in matrimony than you dollbabies claim you are. All we're

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ALL FIGURED OUT!

By PHIL SQUIRES

"Don't bury me down in the lowlands,"
Said old cowpuncher Bill.
"But when I die, please bury me high
On top of a great big hill.

"Up there my soul an' heaven
Won't be too far apart—
An' if I'm due for the devil's crew,
It'll give me a downhill start!"

doin' is just foolin' around, tryin' out an experiment. Ain't that right, Ed?"

"Well, yes—an' no," began Ed, sorter doubtful. "I reckon maybe—"

"So when we come courtin' you gals with music an' offer you to marry us," continued Butch, "you figger we're just a couple of pore but handsome cowhands, an' turn us down flat. You don't even show no interest in seein' Uncle Sockfoot's letter. So that settles that. Now me an' Ed can get to work fixin' up this damage we caused without bein' obliged to carry on no courtin'—though I'll admit this widow woman with the silver-shine hair kinder takes my eye. If I was only just a little younger—"

"Shame on you to talk like that an' me old enough to be your mother!" busted in Lydia Simms, blushing some herownself. "Come on over to the cook tent where we can look at that arm—an' look out you don't drip blood all over everything."

Butch's arm was considerably bruise-bloody, but not busted Lorna and her mom done most of the bandaging, but it was Louise that stood around and looked sorry for him—and Ed Watson that wished she wouldn't. They was both mighty purty gals, but in spite of how much alike they looked, it didn't require no microscope to see that Louise was more the soft-eyed, shy-spoken, sympathetic kind that most lonesome cowpokes would be liable to fall in love with.

Butch and Ed put in the rest of that day catching their spooked broncs, setting up the knocked-down tent, snaking in and chopping up a batch of wood, troughing the spring and chousing home the Runnin' Woman's red razorback that evidently had got out again. Not to mention Mrs. Simms sending them out with her shotgun to shoot a couple of cottontails for supper. They got a few fleas on 'em dressing out the rabbits, and they didn't like rabbit stew anyhow—but that's what they got, so they ate it.

After supper they dug their guitar and mandolin out of the ruins, but they was too busted up to play, so they took the soogans Lydia loaned them and went off up the draw a piece to bed down under a cedar. Butch's arm kept aching him and Ed just couldn't seem to go to sleep either.

"Butch," he said solemnly, "I'm in love."

"What with—rabbit meat?"

"Yessir, even rabbit meat, by golly, as long as *she's* the one that cooks it!"

"Who—the ol' lady?"

"Don't git funny, cowboy. I mean Louise. Boy, she's—"

"Fine!" busted in Butch. "I'd just as soon court her as anybody. How soon you reckon we better show her Uncle Sockfoot's letter?"

"Damn the letter!" sighed Ed. "I purt' near wish we hadn't never wrote it!"

IT TOOK them cowboys several days just to clean up the débris to where they could even begin to think about rebuilding the walls. Then it was plain they was going to need more adobes, so they carried water, shucked off their boots and started trompin' mud. Meantime them three women set around and watched without ever raising a hand to help. Maybe this sorter galled the boys, but at least as far as Louise was concerned they never let it show. The way them two mud-puddlin' cowpokes batted their eyes at that little gal was a caution. The old lady's rule against courtin' didn't seem to hold 'em down any to speak of. Butch sweet-talked her with a lot of joshing, but Ed Watson was as earnest as a horse thief trying to talk himself out of a hanging.

"Louise," Ed would say, "I sure wish my mandoleen wasn't busted, because just one look into them bluebell eyes of yours makes me feel like I could play purtier music than I ever did play before, right outa my heart."

Butch was a heap more liable to flip a gob of mud at her nose, pretend he had to come wipe it off, then smear more on instead—if she didn't run.

"Yonder goes Sugar-Drip after the preacher," he would grin if she did run, "so her an' me can git married!"

Between them they kept shy little Louise blushing to beat the band, and once in a while Butch thought he could see that it didn't set too good with Lorna not to be getting her share of the attention. Once when he started to chase after Louise,

Lorna stuck a hoe handle between his ankles. The fall like to busted the wind out of him and hurt his arm some, but he got up laughing.

"Well, anyhow, that proves a man can take a trip without goin' anywhere, don't it, Sassy-Face?"

"I hope you didn't hurt your arm so you'll have an excuse not to work," said Lorna. "If you'd stay at work like Ed does"—she flashed Ed a smile—"instead of horsing around, maybe this job wouldn't last all summer."

"If you want this job finished quick," drawled Butch, "I don't see nobody standin' on your shirt tail to keep you from helpin' us."

"Maybe you ain't looked good," chirped Mrs. Simms, shifting her shotgun. "If I was to turn my chickabiddies loose to help, you boys might git the notion they're in the habit of doin' the men's work for 'em an' want to marry 'em!"

"How are they at chousin' hogs?" asked Butch.

A COUPLE of nights later, at their wickiup off up the draw, Butch and Ed had an argument.

"I sure wish you'd quit pesterin' my gal, Butch," said Ed.

"*Your* gal? You ready for a showdown on that?"

"You mean—"

"I mean show her Uncle Sockfoot's letter and find out how she takes it!"

"I dunno, Butch. I ain't foolin' about wantin' to marry Louise. I purt' near wish we hadn't never made such a fool bet in the first place."

"You mean," said Butch dryly, "you're scared that if we let her git the notion that one of us is goin' to inherit Uncle Sockfoot's ranch an' money, she'll hold off choosin' till she finds out which one it is, just like I bet you she would!"

Ed Watson gave an uneasy shrug. "Hell, no," he said. "But it ain't right for a feller to play no such a hoax on a gal he's in love with!"

"It was in the agreement that we was both supposed to court the same gal, wasn't it? Is a bet a bet, or ain't it?"

"Okay," sighed Ed. "Let's go show 'em the letter, right now—tonight—an' git it over with!"

They found the tents already dark, but Butch roused 'em by whinnying more or less like a horse.

"Whoa, mule!" said Lorna's voice inside the tent. "You aren't fooling anybody, Butch Duvaney!"

"Okay, Sassy-Face," Butch called back cheerfully. "You three gals put on some duds an' come over to the cook tent with a lamp to read by. We're goin' to show you Uncle Sockfoot's letter."

"We're not interested, thank you!" It was still Lorna doing the talking. "Trot on back to your straw pile!"

"Accordin' to Uncle Sockfoot's letter," said Butch, "either me or Ed is due to inherit somethin' under a million dollars. We figgered maybe you smart gals could help us figger out which one it is."

From inside the tent came the sound of considerable whispering, then the old lady's lively chirp: "Go on in the cook tent. We'll be right over. There's fresh doughnuts in the big stone jar, but you leave 'em alone or I'll take my shotgun to you!"

Butch was wiping doughnut crumbs from his lips when the three gals arrived, accompanied by one shotgun. Lydia looked spry and suspicious, Lorna looked bored and beautiful, and Louise looked worried and winsome. Butch took a big sealed envelope from his pocket, tore it open and pulled out a folded sheet of paper and a smaller sealed envelope. He spread the paper out on the table.

"We wasn't supposed to open this," he explained, "until one or the other of us was in serious danger of marriage."

"Then you opened it too soon," chirped Mrs. Simms. "I didn't fetch my specs, Lorna. You read it out loud."

"To all women of the female sex into whose hands this here documint may fall," Lorna read. "This here will notify you that to wit Butch Duvaney and to wit Ed Watson, their mothers being my sisters, therefore I am obliged to clame them for Nephews. In spite of the fact to wit that one plays a guitar, and the other a mandoleen and neither one is any account to speak of, this here will notify you, to wit, that I aim to give a 40,000 acre ranch and $10,000 in the bank to which-

ever one of them's name is found in the blue sealed envelope whenever they git married, as I doubt if either one will ever find a gal that will have him any other way. If it's money you're after, gals, open the envelope and find out which one of these no account cowpokes you want.

John J. (Sockfoot) Johnson
Uncle to Same"

"Goodness!" said Lorna as she laid the letter down. "Your uncle has a mighty unusual name, hasn't he?"

"The 'J' stands for Joshaway," said Butch. "Don't be bashful, ladies! Which one of you wants to open the secret envelope an' marry a rich husband?" He slapped it on his palm.

"Give it to me," said shy, quiet little Louise.

"You mean," said Butch, throwing a triumphant look at Ed Watson but still holding on to the envelope, "that you are fixin' to decide between Ed Watson an' me accordin' to which one is due to git Uncle Sockfoot's money?"

"She don't mean nothing of the kind!" gulped Ed, looking purty worried. "Listen, Louise honey, you don't sure 'nough want to look in that envelope, do you? I mean—"

"Give me the envelope," said Louise firmly.

"Not till you answer my question," grinned Butch. "Do you mean—"

"Hand her the envelope, Lanky Shanks," chirped Mrs. Simms, picking up her shotgun.

"Wait, Louise!" Ed Watson grabbed holt of her arm to hold her back from taking the envelope Butch held out to her, but the shy little gal's dander must have been up, for she took it anyway. Only instead of tearing it open, she started to tear it in two, smack across the middle.

"Hold on, Leeze!" Lorna let out a squeal and grabbed it out of her hand. "Ten thousand dollars would be a lot of money—if you had it!"

THEN, just as it looked as if Lorna was fixing to tear the envelope open, somebody blowed out the light. From where they was standing, it could have been Mrs. Lydia Simms, or it could have been Butch Duvaney.

There was some kind of a scramble in the darkness, the sound of a girlish gasp followed purty quick by a smacky noise like somebody getting his face slapped.

"Strike a match, Ed," said Butch's humorous drawl. "If the gal I just kissed is who I think it is, I'd just as soon she'd marry me for my money as any other way!"

It was the old lady who struck a match on her shotgun barrel and lit the lamp, revealing Ed Watson and Louise standing suspiciously close to each other on one side of the table, and Butch aholt of both of Lorna's hands on the other. The difference was that Louise didn't make no move away from Ed, while as quick as the light came on Lorna began tugging to get loose. The blue sealed envelope wasn't anywheres in sight.

"Louise, honey," stammered Ed Watson, sneaking one arm around her shoulders and scratching his head with the other, "don't you reckon we just as well tell 'em?"

Louise gave him a quick smile, then throwed her chin up. "Mom," she said, "I don't care what you and Lorna think—Ed and I are going to get married. And I don't care a whoop whether he's due to get any of his uncle's money or not!"

"Tally one!" grinned Butch, still aholt of Lorna's hands, but dancing around considerable to keep from getting his shins kicked. "That means I owe Ed a hundred bucks and a saddle! Stop me if you've heard this before—Lorna, my love, will you marry me?"

"No!" said Lorna. "I won't be any man's second choice! Besides—where's that envelope?"

"Think nothing of it," said Butch, patting his shirt and throwing a wink at the old lady. "Of course I admit that Lydia was the one I really taken a shine to, but you come next. The only reason I was batting my eyes at Louise was on account of a bet."

"Turn loose of my hands!" said Lorna purty sharp, and Butch done so. "And let me see that envelope!"

"Your eyes sure sparkle purty when you're mad," said Butch, still breezy but beginning to get a look on his face like a man afraid he's about to miss his grab for

the saddle horn. "The way it was, I bet Ed that if him an' me courted the same gal, she'd pick the one she thought might have the most money. All right, we both made the play for Louise, an' I lost my bet. But look, Lorna, you don't sure 'nough care what it says in that envelope, do you?"

Lorna gave a toss of her purty head. "Why should I? I wouldn't marry you for your money if you had a million, cash in hand! Come on, Mom and Leeze—"

"Hold on a minute!" Butch grabbed holt of her arm like a shot wildcat grabbing at a limb as he falls out of a tree. "I reckon I might as well tell you—neither one of us has got any ten-thousand-dollar prospects. We ain't even got an Uncle Sockfoot. Fact is, me an' Ed ain't even cousins, an' all it says in this envelope I grabbed away from you an' hid inside my shirt is 'April Fool.' We framed up the whole shebang."

"That," said Lorna, with the first hint of a smile she had showed all evening, "is just about what I figured! Well, good night! Mom, make him turn me loose!"

"You got any spunk?" chirped the old lady, picking up her shotgun. "Or are you going to turn her a-loose like she says?"

Butch didn't even act like he heard her. "Lorna," he said, "now that I've et all the crow I can think of—will you marry me?"

LORNA took a look at the sap-happy faces of Louise and Ed over across the table, then hove a sigh, smiled and batted her eyes plumb purty at the crow-eatin' cowboy still aholt of her hand.

"You might ask me again when you get the 'dobe work all finished, Butch," she said. "Unless you change your mind!"

Evidently Butch wasn't aiming to change his mind. In spite of Lydia standing by with her two-holed bangshooter, he slung his long arms plumb around the gal and kissed her, right there before them all.

With a sigh Mrs. Lydia Simms set down her shotgun. "Well, girls," she chirped, "looks like it worked, didn't it?"

"What worked?" asked Butch.

"That 'Cowboys Keep Out' sign over the gate," chuckled Lydia. "An' my shotgun. You don't think I wanted my little chickabiddies gettin' courted by ordinary cowpokes without no spunk, do you?"

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Which of these Rocky Mountain flowers are you most likely to find blooming in July: blue columbine or blue violet?

2. Can you name a Western town, mountain range, and river bearing the name of a reptile?

3. July 24 is celebrated as Pioneer's Day in what Western state?

4. When an old-time cowboy said he "worked from see to see," what did he mean?

5. Abilene, Ellsworth and Dodge City, all in Kansas, were three hell-roaring, cattle-shipping towns. Why did Abilene flourish first, Ellsworth second and Dodge City last?

6. If a New Mexico ranchman should hire out to take a dude hunting with a pack of dogs, which of these big game animals might they be after: mountain lion, deer, antelope, bear?

7. "Old Faithful" geyser is located in what National Park?

8. When a cowboy says that a horse has "hot blood" in its veins, what does he mean?

9. In old-time cowboy slang, what is the difference between "shakin' hands with grandma" and "shakin' hands with St. Peter"?

10. Texas has only a few mountain ranges, most all located in its southwestern corner. Name one of these mountain ranges.

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 90. **Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total score is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

Worth a Gamble

By Dorothy L. Bonar

SEPARATED by the bitterness of bloodshed, these two were yet drawn together by a magnetism stronger even than the shadow of death

WHEN THE CLOCK struck midnight, Karen Lindstrom laid her knitting down and brushed a lock of blonde hair off her forehead. Although her hands had accomplished much in the past few hours, she had gotten nowhere mentally. This was the first time she had ever waited up for her brother, and she knew he would resent it. She was also aware that, unless she hit upon the right approach, making an issue of his recent behavior was apt to do more harm than good.

Yet she could no longer sit back in silence. Lonnie was nineteen, two years younger than she. He must be made to see that he was heading for trouble, spending so much time in the saloons and gambling dens of Desmet. He must be made to realize that the increasing closeness of his association with Bern Hobson boded no good.

"You'll have your hands full with Lonnie—now that I won't be around to hold a tight rein on him." Clearly Karen recalled their father's last words. "Promise you'll do your best—to make a man of him."

"Of course, Dad! I'll always do my best for Lonnie!"

And she had tried to keep that promise, but with little success.

First there had been that wandering prospector's chance strike in the hills near Desmet, transforming the once small cowtown into a roaring mining camp, with temptations for the young and eager multiplied a thousand fold. And second there was . . .

"It's a scatter-gun, mister,

A sound outside interrupted the girl's chain of thought. Her heart gave a tremendous lurch. Although its owner had drawn back too quickly to permit her to distinguish features, she had glimpsed a man's face peering in at her. For a moment she sat perfectly still, mouth going dry. Then she remembered her father's shotgun on the wall behind her, and she got up to take it down.

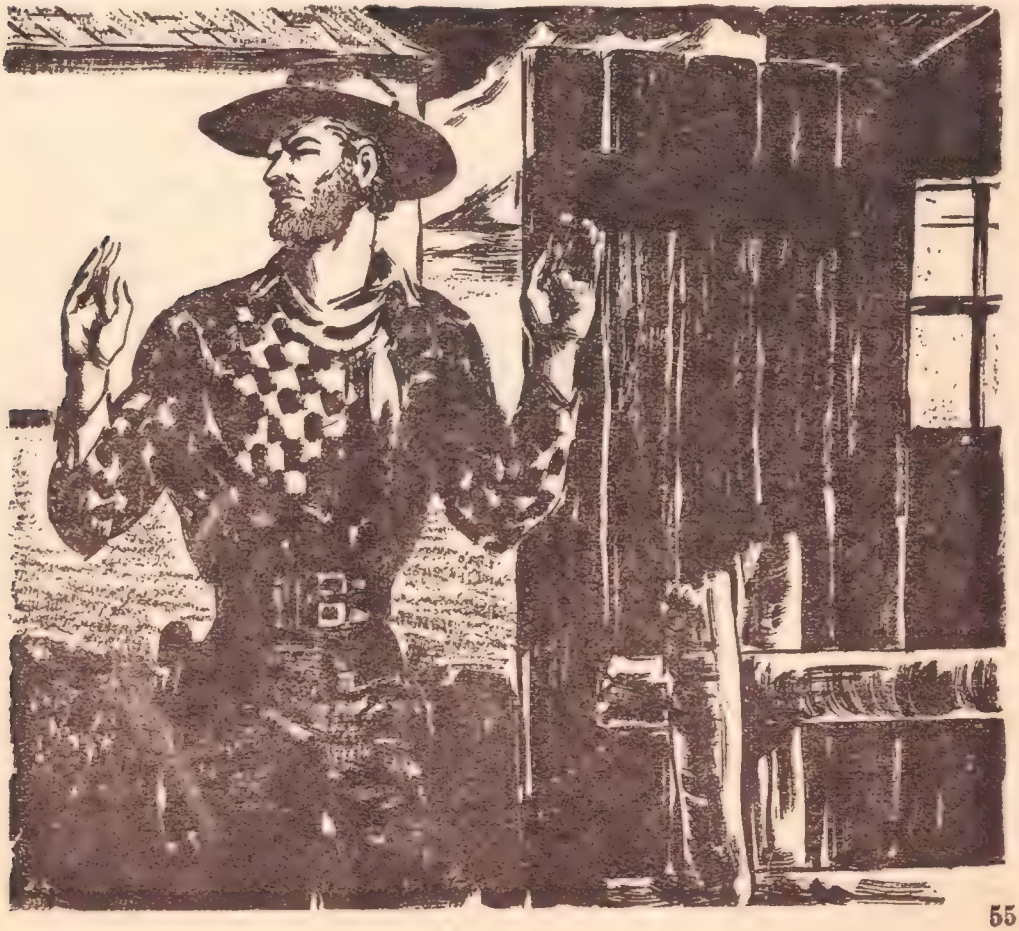
The prowler was no doubt one of the drunken riffraff now thronging Desmet. The Rafter L was seven miles from town, and she had never before been molested. Still, with Lonnie haunting the Plaza or Silver Spur every night, word of a sister at home alone would get around.

Well, he was in for a surprise if he attempted to force his way in, reflected Karen grimly, but the moments passed uneventfully, until Karen began to hope the prowler had gone. Then a noise at the rear of the house froze her to attention.

Quietly Karen made her way into the unlighted kitchen. Shotgun leveled, she awaited the sound of his stealthy step on the porch, but there was only silence again until a horse whinnied down at the corral. Startled, Karen flew to the window.

It was a night totally unsuited for any secretive undertaking. The horse corral and the animals inside were clearly visible in the moonlight, and Karen glimpsed the prowler, too—a tall, dark figure just slipping into the barn, where Blackbird, her trim Morgan mare, occupied a stall.

be careful," she warned. "Turn around so I can get a look at you!"



"You're not getting off with her, mister!" muttered Karen determinedly, grasping her gun.

She unbarred the door and slipped outside. The chicken house stood not too far away. From there on other buildings would provide cover for a circuitous approach of the barn where she hoped to surprise the intruder.

She waited for several minutes beside the half-opened door before the man loomed out of the dark interior into sharp focus in the moonlight. Karen's heart pounded. She jabbed the bore of her weapon into his back.

"It's a scatter-gun, mister, so be careful!" she warned, as he froze in his tracks. "Put your hands up. Then take two steps ahead and turn around!"

After the slightest of hesitations he began to obey. Only then did Karen realize that he had left the barn empty handed. But that didn't mean he hadn't intended to make off with Blackbird—he'd probably decided to hunt up the tack room first, hoping to help himself to a good saddle, too.

"Brush your hat off your head so I can get a look at you!" she commanded.

Again he obeyed in silence. As the headgear dropped to the ground, his face emerged from the shadow of its brim into moonlight. Karen surveyed him with interest.

She saw a young man, badly in need of a shave, his dark hair long and shaggy. Nearly worn out range clothes, ragged and soiled, further labeled him exactly what she had expected to find—a typical saddle bum.

"You're lucky, my friend," said Karen coldly. "My first notion was to let go with both barrels on sight after the way you scared me, prowling around here. Sometimes it's smarter to shoot first and ask questions later."

It was a night unsuited for prowling

UNEXPECTEDLY his whiskery lips parted, revealing the gleam of white, even teeth. "You sure look scared, all right," he admitted, his glance flicking to the shotgun trained upon his middle.

Karen's five feet two of slender curves stiffened. There was nothing humorous about the situation. As she opened her mouth to tell him so, he went on sternly.

"Do you mean to tell me that a girl like you hasn't got any menfolk to protect her?"

About to inform him about Lonnie, Karen remembered that it was her place to ask questions. "I can protect myself," she retorted. "Now—"

"Against some, maybe," he cut in. "And if you stayed in the house behind locked doors. But in the open—s'pose I'd had a pardner? Don't you realize the chance you took, coming out here after me?"

"But I had to! I couldn't let—" Again Karen checked herself, amazed at the way he had once more almost succeeded in putting her on the defensive. Talk about a glib tongue and nerve! After the suspicious circumstances in which he'd been caught, he actually dared to try to confuse the issue by pointing out the folly of what she'd done.

"Thanks for being so concerned for me," she said. "To make you happier we'll do the rest of our talking behind those safe, locked doors you mentioned. My brother will be home soon, and he'll love meeting you, I'm sure. Turn around and head for the house!"

"Wait!" he pleaded. "I can't—I mean—will you let me pick up my hat first? It's a good one."

"I'll get it," broke in Karen, suspicious of trickery. "You just keep those hands in plain sight and march. Now!"

Shrugging, her prisoner turned and started slowly forward. Warily Karen stooped to retrieve his fallen headgear.

Just as her left hand touched it, she noticed the sound of approaching hoofs.

At least two riders were advancing upon the Rafter L at a gallop. Involuntarily the girl froze, glance switching in the direction of the sound. And in that moment it happened.

Karen didn't see her prisoner move. She felt only the impact of his hurtling body as it knocked her down, his hand thrusting up the muzzle of the shotgun. Miraculously the weapon did not go off. It tangled in Karen's skirts and she tripped over its butt in attempting to scramble to her feet. By the time she had picked herself up a second time the prowler had disappeared, hat and all.

"Darn!" whispered Karen explosively.

SHE FORGOT her chagrin, however, as she recognized the two horsemen entering the ranch yard. They were Lonnie and Bern Hobson. Wondering what could have brought them tearing out of the night at just this inopportune moment, Karen caught up her weapon and hurried to meet them in front of the house.

"Sis! What are you doing out here with Dad's gun?" demanded Lonnie, sliding to the ground.

He was of medium height and dark, and usually his expression was cheerful and gay. Now the strained look about his face caused Karen's adventure to seem unimportant.

"Some range tramp tried to make off with Blackbird, that's all. But he's gone now and doesn't matter. What about you? What's happened to bring you home like this?"

Lonnie drew a deep breath. "So that's all it was! That's good—although I'm sorry you had to run the hombre off alone, of course. But he'll probably never have nerve enough to come back again, so we might as well forget him. Anyway, there's something more important to think about now. Let's go inside. C'mon, Bern."

Karen followed the pair into her cheerful living room, a sense of foreboding gripping her. Yet, even then she was not prepared for what Lonnie had to say.

"I'm in trouble, Karen," he began huskily. "And only you can help me out of it. It you won't . . ." He licked his lips. "I'm due to wind up—charged with murder!"

"Murder!" Karen groped for a chair and sank into it. "You can't mean . . ."

"I shot and tried to rob a man while I was drunk!"

As though goaded by desperation, then, Lonnie poured out his tale, and the shock of it caused Karen to forget everything else.

While playing poker the preceding night, he had lost heavily to a miner who called himself Bill Terry. In his liquor fogged condition he had thought he was being cheated and had been able to convince himself that it would be simple justice to waylay Terry and relieve him of his dishonest winnings. It hadn't occurred to him that the miner might put up a fight. But all of a sudden they were struggling. The gun went off and Terry collapsed.

"That sobered me up." Lonnie's voice dropped to a husky whisper. "I realized the fix I'd got into. In the fight the bandana had been pulled off my face, and he'd probably recognized me. I couldn't leave him there for someone else to find. If he talked I was done for—especially if he died afterwards. Anyway, I didn't want that to happen. I'd been a drunken fool, but I didn't want to be a murderer, too. I got panicky and couldn't think. So I dragged him into the brush and hunted up Hobson."

"Hobson!" The name penetrated Karen's numbness. Abruptly she turned upon the silent onlooker who was Lonnie's closest companion. "And where were you while all this was taking place?"

"In the Silver Spur, dancin'." Hobson met her accusing brown gaze with eyes so pale a grey as to seem almost luminous. He was in his late twenties, tall and heavy-set, good-looking save for the ravages of dissipation on his face. Six months ago he had been left the neighboring Circle H, an inheritance he had all but squandered. Because of the unsavory influence he wielded over her brother, Karen detested the man.

HIS AWARENESS of this fact was obvious as he added, "Sorry, but this is one thing you can't lay onto me, Karen. I didn't even know Lonnie'd left

the Silver Spur until he called me outside and spilled what'd happened. The only reason I'm mixed up in this at all is because I'm tryin' to help out a pal."

"That's true, Karen," broke in Lonnie. "And he figured my only way out, too!"

"Which was?"

"First of all, to hide Terry somewhere and try to pull him through, of course. We did that. But Bern and I don't know much about nursing and we don't dare call Doc Holm. Anyway, he's out of town right now. But you've had lots of experience helping him, so you could probably do Terry just about as much good. The bullet went clean through and won't have to be dug out. So will you give it a whirl, Sis, for my sake?"

For a full moment Karen could only struggle with the emotions aroused by the incredible tale. Hobson, plainly mistaking her silence for hesitation, went on to explain that the wounded man was in an old Rafter L line shack. She could pretend to have found him and taken him there as the nearest shelter.

"He'll be plumb grateful to you, naturally, for savin' his life," Hobson went on in a wheedling tone. "And you can straighten this whole thing out. You're damn good lookin', Karen. By the time he perks up, so's you can't beat around the bush no longer, you could have him wound around your little finger. Break down and bawl a little then—confess that Lonnie's your kid brother, and lay it on thick about how sorry he is for what he'd done. Give Terry back his poke o' dust to prove he ain't been robbed, and the old fool'll be willing to drop the whole thing. It's a perfect setup. Can't you see that?"

Karen could, and suddenly she felt a little sick. For she realized that their real reason for coming to her was out at last. In Lonnie's guilty look, as well as in Hobson's speech, she read the truth. It was simply that they had seen a possibility of using feminine wiles to extricate Lonnie from his predicament.

And in spite of everything he said, that was what concerned her brother most, saving—not the life of the man he had shot—but himself. To do that he would resort to the cheapest of trickery and drag his own sister into it too. He had sunk that low.

"I can't believe it!" whispered Karen involuntarily, a sob swelling her throat.

Lonnie and Hobson exchanged glances. Then, misunderstanding, the former put his hand to a hip pocket. "I don't know why you should think I'd make up a yarn like that," he said huskily. "But if it's proof you want. . . ."

He sent a small object thudding heavily to the table top. It was a miner's poke, plainly filled with gold. In small letters burned into leather it bore the name, "Bill Terry." Worst of all, the side uppermost bore also a dark, crusted stain that was unmistakably dried blood.

From a great distance Karen heard Hobson's voice. "How about it? Are you going to save your brother and come with us?"

Karen moistened her lips. "Yes," she said faintly. "Saddle Blackbird—while I get ready."

SHIVERING, though her room was warm, Karen changed into boots, divided skirt, and blouse. She made up a bundle of medicines and clean linens, adding from force of habit the half-finished red sweater on which she had been working. In the course of much practical nursing for Doc Holm, she had discovered the value of knitting as a means of lessening the strain of an all-night vigil. In ten minutes she was in the saddle, riding through the night with her double escort.

She needn't worry about anything going wrong, they told her. Bill Terry had no partner, no one at all to raise a hue and cry over his disappearance. Several days would probably elapse before the matter would be called to the attention of Sheriff Barker, and he already had his hands full trying to maintain law and order in a wide-open, gold-crazed town. He would scarcely be able to devote himself immediately to a search for one missing miner among a thousand. And time was all they needed. So the success or failure of this scheme to save Lonnie depended entirely upon Karen's ability both as nurse and actress.

"Remember, stall as long as possible—

don't tell him your real name," cautioned Hobson, as they reined up before the one room log cabin that had been old Eric Lindstrom's homestead shack long ago. "He won't be able to connect you with Lonnie by your looks. And it ain't likely he's ever seen you two together any place."

Karen closed her lips tightly as Lonnie broke in.

"We fetched a lamp, grub and such from the Circle H. And we blanketed the windows so the light wouldn't draw anyone this way. Don't reckon Bern and me ought to go in with you now. He might be in shape to recognize us."

"He's never regained consciousness while you were with him?"

"No. The only time he opened his eyes they were plumb wild—fever, I guess, because what he jabbered didn't make sense. Kept talking to some kid he called 'Glen,' about a pair of chaps he's promised him for his sixth birthday. It—it was kinda tough—listening to him." Lonnie's voice betrayed an unexpected depth of feeling. "If he goes on like that again, Karen, try not to hate me! Because . . . maybe some day I'll be able to make you understand I'm not as bad as you think."

"It's pretty late to start whinin' now!" declared Hobson harshly.

To Karen's astonishment, Lonnie stiffened, whipped about. But his anger died as swiftly as it had flared up. "Guess that's right," he admitted. "You'll find Terry's gunbelt and six-shooter inside, Sis, in case of an emergency. I'll put Blackbird up now and come back in the morning to see how you're making out. Goodnight and—and thanks."

He led the black mare into the shed. Karen, bundle in hand, started towards the cabin. Hobson stopped her.

"Remember, your job ain't only to save Terry's life," he whispered hoarsely. "The main thing is to win his confidence, draw him out—or the scheme won't work."

Karen choked back a biting retort.

BILL TERRY'S condition turned out to be much better than she had been led to believe. He was a man somewhere in his fifties, long and lank, with thick greying hair and beard. Already his wound showed signs of healing; his fever, though high, was not alarming. After Karen had freshened his bed with some of the linens brought from home, he quieted down and seemed to rest better.

Fixing up the extra bunk for herself, Karen napped the next day in order to be fortified for the night hours, when she knew her patient's condition was apt to be the most critical. By the time darkness had fallen she had settled down to watch over him and knit.

A growing length of crimson wool marked the passing of time. Eventually Karen measured a sleeve to her arm, and as she glanced at her patient she discovered that his eyes were open.

Slowly their gaze traveled about the cabin, coming to rest at last upon her. Her heart gave a thud as she realized that he was conscious, his mind clear. In a moment he would begin to ask questions, and he was not yet in any condition to talk.

"Please don't try to say anything!" she begged, bending forward. "You're coming along fine. And there'll be plenty of time for explanations when you're stronger. Try to go to sleep now, will you?"

But he was not to be put off. "Where am I?" he demanded in a determined, if weak, voice. "And who're you?"

Karen couldn't answer at once. She'd known that she would do anything to save Bill Terry from death, but she'd felt that, despite what Lonnie and Hobson expected of her, when the time came she'd find herself compelled to tell this man the truth despite the consequences.

But the bond of blood was too strong to set aside.

"I'm Karen L-Larson," she said, and with only a slight tremor in her voice gave out the false account of her discovery of him, wounded and unconscious. "I'm from back East—visiting at the Double Bar B all summer," she fictionized further, to provide a plausible background for herself. "I was afraid to try to move you that far, so I brought you to this old shack and moved over here the things I needed to take care of you."

"You went to all that trouble for some-

body you never seen before?" he demanded wonderingly. "For a whiskery old goat who might of been a bum, for all you could tell?"

"I didn't see it that way. You were hurt and needed help." Karen fought hard to hold back tears of shame. Plainly the plan was working only too well. He was going to be overwhelmingly grateful, completely gullible, all of which would make her pose of an angel of mercy that much harder to bear.

"Never mind me, though," she added hastily. "Do you remember what happened —how you got shot?"

His face hardened. "I sure do. And I think I know who the skunk was, too, and exactly what he did after leavin' me for dead. He went to my claim and just about tore my shack apart searchin' for my cache —all the gold I've dug out of the ground since comin' to Desmet!"

"Oh, no!" burst out Karen in horror. "He didn't!" Just in time she caught herself. "I mean—surely no one could be so—so cold-blooded!"

Her cheeks burned, for, having lived all her life in the West, she knew the words with which she'd covered up her near blunder had been naive.

THE WOUNDED man, however, had accepted her as a visitor to the land, a tenderfoot unused to its violence. "Of course a lady like you would feel that way," he admitted. "You'd be plumb shocked, Miss, if you knew of some of the things men'd do for gold. I'll settle with that young skunk myself, soon's I'm able. Right now, I want you to do something for me. Will you?"

"You should go to sleep. You've talked too much already!" protested Karen.

In a moment the thunder of hoofs brought him close to her

But again he refused to heed. "I'll never be able to rest until I know my gold is safe," he declared. "And you can take care of that for me." As she opened her lips, he went on stubbornly. "I know I can trust you. I've always been one to size up a body right off, and I've never been wrong in my life. But even if I was a mite leery of you, I'd still have to take a chance. You see, I'm bettin' that young sidewinder didn't find my gold. Still, if it ain't moved pronto, somebody else *will* find it, sure!"

"I don't understand."

"It's like this. Sometimes the best sheriff or marshal they is can't keep law in a gold camp. And Sheriff Barker in Desmet ain't what you could call a real fightin' man. How long do you think I can be away from my claim without someone jumpin' it? It's bound to happen pretty soon, if it ain't already. Some jasper will move into my shack and make himself to home. He'll eat my grub, finish up the sack of flour that's half-gone and open up the extra one beside it. And when he does that, he'll find my gold. I put it up in small pokes, hid it in that extra sack of flour and sewed it shut again! Now do you see why I've got to move fast to save it?"

"What do you want me to do?" faltered Karen.

"Go over there right away. My name's Bill Terry and my shack is above Desmet, right at the first bend of the creek. You can't miss it. Slip inside, slit open that sack of flour and fetch the gold back here." He smiled a little. "I reckon that sounds like a pretty risky job for a young lady. But it shouldn't be, because at night everybody's in town celebratin'. Besides, half that gold is goin' to be yours anyway, so it'll be worth your while."

"Oh, no! I couldn't accept a gift like that!" protested Karen. "And I don't see how I could leave you here alone so long."

"I'll be all right," he insisted. "What'll

do me the most harm is frettin' over that gold. You see, I ain't been savin' it up for myself. It's for my son. I'll tell you all about him when you get back. Just get goin' before it's too late, will you?"

Uncertain and perturbed, Karen picked up her knitting, wound up the loose yarn and stuck the needles through the crimson ball. "Promise you'll remain quiet while I'm gone?" she stipulated.

With his affirmative reply she tossed the knitting upon her own bunk. Helping herself to the six-shooter hanging on the wall, she tucked it into her belt, gave its owner a last reassuring glance and departed.

CIRCLING Desmet, it took her but a little while to reach her destination. In the shadows of an alder thicket she reined up, listening to the sounds audible above the thumping of her heart—the distant roar of the town's habitual revelry, the more soothing murmur of flowing water at Blackbird's feet.

Across the creek, on a jutting arm of land formed by the stream's sharp curves, Bill Terry's shack stood in the moonlight, dark and apparently deserted. Though Karen waited many moments, she saw no signs of life about it, nor did she hear any in the vicinity.

"Looks like the way is clear, Blackbird," she murmured and sent the mare splashing to the opposite bank. Leaving her in the shadows behind the cabin, Karen went round to the door. She lifted the latch and sent it creaking inward. But she made no move to enter.

Never had she seen more intense darkness. Not a single ray of moonlight penetrated the interior, suggesting that Bill Terry had been in the habit of blinding his windows, at least at night.

Well, a man with gold had to be careful not to make too good a target of himself after dark. Karen dug a handful of matches from a pocket.

Match by match she made her way past a crudely fashioned table and bench. She located the fireplace, its hearth grey with ashes. She found shelves in a corner loaded with food supplies. As she bent to examine a half-used sack of flour beneath them, a soft rustling sound to the left whipped her erect. Her tiny light fell, snuffing out.

Frozen with fear she stood in the darkness, the pound of her heart thundering in her ears. "It was a mouse or pack rat, silly!" she told herself silently, desperately. "Shacks like this always have them. Light another match and you'll see there's nothing to be afraid of!"

Summoning every bit of reserve courage, she obeyed her own command. Nothing fearful appeared before her. With a deep breath of relief she bent again to the half-depleted sack of floor, excitement skimming through her veins as she noted the full, unopened one beside it. That would be the gold cache. Thank heaven Terry's treasure was safe!

Extinguishing her match, she delved into a pocket for a penknife. And then in the darkness close by, a board creaked. Karen wildly gauged the distance to the floor. She reached shakily for the six-shooter tucked into her belt. And in that instant, a hand came out of the darkness to brush her cheek.

She knew that its owner, attempting a surprise capture, had misjudged distance in the dark and reached for her too far to one side. There was nothing supernatural about it. Yet the manner in which it had so suddenly and silently materialized out of nothing made it seem somehow eerie and horrible.

Sheer terror ripped a scream from Karen's throat. Forgetting the weapon she carried, she made a convulsive leap backward, whirling in blind panic, her only desire to flee.

A bench tripped her, sent her catapulting head first over its top. Another scream broke from her lips, only to be cut off as she brought up hard against the stone of the fireplace. Instantly all sound and sensation ceased.

The first thing she became aware of again was lantern light and then that she was still in Bill Terry's cabin. Her head ached dully, but nothing terrible seemed to have happened to her. She was lying on a bunk. Both her hands and her feet remained free.

AFTER a bit she turned her head. And then she saw him, sitting on a bench close by, watching her intently. Karen felt a quickening of surprise, for he didn't look at all the sort who would lurk in darkness and pounce upon a lone girl without warning. Instead he looked nice, even attractive.

He was a cowboy, not a miner, with a fine breadth of shoulders. He was about twenty-five. He had a clean-shaven face, deeply tanned. Beneath a shoved back Stetson, his hair was dark and neatly trimmed. It was only his attitude that proved disconcerting. Even as her gaze met his he did not move or speak, but continued to peer at her with dark, steady eyes.

Suddenly it struck Karen that there was something familiar about those eyes. Had she met this man before? Abruptly a chord of memory sounded far back in her brain.

"Oh, no!" she gasped incredulously. "You're not—not—"

"The prowler you caught last night at the Rafter L but couldn't hold onto?" he finished for her. "I'm afraid I am, Miss Lindstrom. And believe me, I never dreamed we'd meet again like this."

"But you look so—so different!" In her amazement over this strange second meeting, after she had forgotten him completely, Karen did not notice that he had addressed her by name. "Last night I took you for a range tramp. And now—"

Her voice faded as she realized what must have wrought the transformation. Horse-stealing wasn't the only method of turning a dishonest dollar. He'd evidently found a quicker and more profitable game, which accounted for his present spruce appearance—and for his presence in this cabin, where he surely could have no right to be.

Conscious of both disappointment and regret, she said scornfully, "I suppose I don't have to worry about Blackbird anymore—at least not until your luck runs out and you need a fast horse in a hurry!"

"Blackbird?" He looked puzzled, and then his face cleared. "Are you trying to make out that I was at the Rafter L last night to steal some fancy saddle horse of yours?" he demanded.

"And are you trying to deny that you were?" Karen flung back at him.

He stared at her, obviously struggling with emotion. Then he said grimly, "You fooled me once with that innocent look and act, but it can't be done again. I know what you're after. And I'm telling you right now that your whole rotten gang is going to pay plenty for any harm that's been done Bill Terry!"

"Bill Terry!" A new, undreamed-of possibility took her by surprise. "You mean you're a friend of his?"

"More than that. I'm Glen Terry—his son!"

ASTOUNDED Karen's first impulse was to deny it. But several flashing recollections caused her to hold her tongue uncertainly. The youngster about whom the wounded miner had talked in his delirium had been named "Glen." Since at such times the brain has a way of digging deep into the past, this man could very well be that boy, grown-up. And Bill Terry when clear-headed had spoken about a son. There was only one discrepancy.

"But he wasn't supposed to have anyone here to—" Karen clapped a hand to her mouth too late.

"Miss him and do anything about it?" finished her captor ironically. "That's right," he continued. "He didn't have anyone here when they jumped him. When he wrote from Desmet that his claim was rich, I figured maybe he needed someone with him, since I knew what a gold camp could be. So I saddled up and headed north, aiming to surprise him.

"I got here, it seems, just a little late. There was nobody at his claim, but his shack had been turned practically inside out. I knew then he was in trouble, so I started trying to trace him without bothering to shave or clean off any of the trail dust I'd collected on my way north."

"And that's why I took you for a—a range tramp!" broke in Karen.

The other nodded. "Which was lucky for me, since it warded off suspicion and kept those two riders who came in from trying to run me down."

"They were my brother, Lonnie, and Bern Hobson of the Circle H," supplied Karen involuntarily.

Again he nodded. "I figured that out at the time. Still I beat it without looking back, because meeting you had mixed me up and I couldn't afford to tangle with anyone until I'd had a chance to think things over again."

He smiled with a curious bitterness. "You see, I found out that first morning in town that Dad had played poker the night before and had won heavy from two young gents who hadn't enjoyed losing. I learned their names and their outfits. Also, that Bill Terry hadn't been seen again after walking out of the Silver Spur with his winnings. So I figured I'd better check up on this Lonnie Lindstrom and Hobson. I went to the Circle H first. There was no one there so I gave it a good search and found nothing. Then I went to the Rafter L."

"You mean you were looking for the gold you thought had been stolen from this shack?" queried Karen.

"I was looking for my dad!" he came back flatly. "His body hadn't been found, so I thought there was a chance of his still being alive. I thought maybe they were holding him prisoner so they could force him to tell where his cache was, in case they weren't able to find it themselves. And that's what they must have done, all right, or you wouldn't be here tonight after the loot.

"I don't know how much torture he took before the truth was wrung out of him. But by the Almighty—" Karen shrank back as he suddenly thrust his face close, its jaw muscles standing out. "Dead or alive, I'll see that every mark on his body is paid for, if it's the last thing I do!"

He leaped to his feet. "Get up!" he ordered harshly. "I've wasted enough time, waiting for you to get over a little bump on the head. You're leading me to where your pals are holding my dad—right now!"

HORROR and confoundment swamped Karen. "Wait!" she gasped. "You're all mixed up. You can't really believe I'm one of a gang that deliberately—"

"It's no go," he declared. "You threw me off the trail that first night by being a girl and looking the way you do. I thought then I must be mistaken—that any kid with a sister like you would have to be decent. So I eliminated Lindstrom and his pal. I decided my only chance was to hole up here and hope that one of the real guilty parties would come back some night for the gold. I did that, and I grabbed you. So it all adds up. You're taking me to your gang's hideout now, if I've got to beat you every step of the way. Get moving before I start at it!"

Standing over her, he actually lifted a hand. Yet brutal as were his words and stance, Karen felt neither indignation nor fear. In spite of everything that had passed between them, intuition told her he would never be able to make good his threat. He might drag or carry her, but he would not strike. He just wasn't that kind. It was simply that the dread of what had happened to someone he loved was driving him to desperation.

"You really are Bill Terry's son, aren't you?" she said gently. "I didn't quite believe it at first. But I do now."

He flung back at her sarcastically, "Am I supposed to ask how you made such a brilliant deduction?"

"No. But it's simple enough. You've never tried to find out where the gold is hidden, even though you believe I know. All you seem to care about is Bill Terry himself, which makes the rest pretty obvious. So I've got to tell you everything now, because the truth isn't nearly so bad as what you're thinking."

"Don't bother," he said coldly. "Maybe you are clever enough to cook up some plausible lie about coming here tonight. But there's one thing you'll never get around. This!"

With a dexterous flip of hand he produced Bill Terry's six-shooter. "This gun happens to be a present I gave Dad two years ago," he went on. "I found it on you."

"Borrowed with his permission," retorted Karen levelly. Squaring her shoulders, she told him the story. "I knew it wasn't anything to be proud of—deceiving him like that," she finished. "And I knew it was

risky—that we were only gambling it would turn out the way we wanted. But I couldn't help feeling that Lonnie was worth a gamble, especially since it might teach him a lesson. And I hoped to make it up to your dad somehow. . . ."

"So you played sweet and won his confidence until he told where his gold was cached!" broke in Glen Terry. "So that's the way it was played—even cleverer than I'd dreamed! And what happened to him after you'd got what you wanted?"

"Nothing!" protested Karen in horror. "He's perfectly all right. And he sent me here after the gold himself. Neither Lonnie nor Hobson know anything about that!"

THE EXPRESSION on his face told her she was wasting breath. He hadn't believed a word she'd said. With sinking heart she realized she couldn't blame

him. In view of the circumstances, her story had sounded weak, almost absurd.

"All right," she capitulated tiredly. "I'll take you to him and let you see for yourself. That's all I can do now."

He held on to her every step of the way to Blackbird. He took up the mare's bridle reins himself while she got into the saddle. Then he swung up behind her. "I staked my horse out in the timber, so the place would seem deserted," he explained. "We'll ride and get him."

Karen said nothing as they started out. But she was very much aware of his nearness, of his arm, relaxed about her, yet ready to tighten into a steel band at an instant's notice. She knew that if she leaned back a bit, her head would fit exactly beneath his chin. And she wondered if he noticed that.

Did he secretly regret that they had not met under happier circumstances—as she was regretting it deep inside? There were tears stinging her eyes when they pulled up. Tethered to a log in a clearing, a clean-limbed chestnut whinnied a soft greeting. Karen turned her head, blinking fiercely as her captor slid to the ground.

"You lead the way," he directed. "But don't get any notions about that filly outrunning my Banner, because she can't."

Karen reined about and dug heels into Blackbird's sides. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Glen Terry run to his mount and vault into his saddle. In a moment a thunder of hoofs brought him up close behind, to surge abreast as soon as they left the timbered creek bottom behind. For several miles they held a swift pace. Then Glen reached out a hand to call a halt.

"How much farther?" he demanded.

"About half a mile. The cabin sets back in those trees ahead."

"Then we'll go easy from here on. No use dashing up and letting your pals know there's two horses coming in, when there's only supposed to be one."

"We can go on foot any time you like," said Karen levelly.

Ten minutes later they advanced upon the cabin with Indian stealth. No glimmer of light shone through its blanket covered windows. It was as quiet inside as it was apparently dark. After satisfying himself that there were no horses in the shed, Karen's captor motioned her towards the door.

"Doesn't seem to be anyone here at the moment," he said. "Just the same, you'd better go in first. And do it casually so if there is somebody inside, they'll be thrown off guard long enough for me to get the drop on them. And if you pull any tricks remember I've got a gun trained on your back. Let's go!"

AWARE of him close behind, six-shooter in hand, Karen pushed open the cabin door. Lamplight funneled outward, bathing her in its glow. She

stepped across the threshold and froze.

For Bill Terry was no longer the comfortably resting patient she had left two hours ago. His blankets were tangled. He was plainly unconscious, with one long arm dangling limply to the floor, and a trickle of blood at one corner of his mouth.

Worst of all, though, he was not alone. At the foot of the bunk, sixgun leveled in readiness and the look of a cornered wolf on his face, stood Bern Hobson.

All in a stunning flash Karen grasped these details. Her recoil took her back a step. Then almost without volition she was whirling, hurling herself upon Glen Terry in a frantic effort to keep him from stepping into Hobson's line of vision and fire.

Unfortunately, however, Glen's view was limited to the bunk and its manhandled occupant.

"No, you don't!" he gritted, tossing her back into the room. He followed with a lithe leap, setting the scene for sudden death, with a white-faced girl caught directly in the line of cross-fire.

Glen had only to squeeze trigger and take instant advantage of his position. Instead he wasted one precious second reaching for Karen, sweeping her aside to safety.

Hobson, exhibiting no such scruples, fired as swiftly as nervous reflexes permitted. Had Glen been standing still he would have died on his feet. As it was, the bullet missed cleanly. Off balance, he managed to snap his first shot. Hobson's second, however, sounded almost simultaneously, and Glen felt the shock of that bullet clear to the shoulder. His six-shooter fairly leaped out of his hand.

KAREN, lifting herself from the floor, looked upon a desperate situation. Beyond a numbed hand, Glen was not hurt. He had been disarmed, though Hobson remained on his feet, weapon still a threat in his right hand, his left arm dangled limply, blood dripping from fingertips.

"That was a lucky shot you got in, Mister!" he snarled. "Mind tellin' me who you are before I finish you off?"

"He's Bill Terry's son!" broke in Karen wildly. "Have you gone crazy, Hobson?"

A sudden moan choked off her rush of words. It had not come from the wounded man in the bunk, so that for the first time she became aware of still another presence. In a corner, unnoticed through the excitement, lay a familiar figure.

"Lonnie!" she screamed. In a twinkling she was bending over her brother, helping him sit up. There was an ugly bleeding gash above his right temple.

"Hobson did it, Karen," he said weakly. "Turned on me—because I tried to make him stop—hurting Terry. He was the one—who shot him in the first place. I said it was me to get you to help—he held my IOU's. . . . Didn't know until tonight he was using us as cat's paw—to get gold. . ." His head dropped and he fainted.

"Let him lay and tie up this other jasper!" ordered Hobson harshly. "I'll save him for a while, if he's the old man's son. Terry'll talk for his sake, I reckon, once he comes to. In the meantime, you can tend this arm of mine and tell me where in hell you went off to tonight, and why!"

Karen rose slowly, the facts falling into place. It was Hobson all the way through, not Lonnie. It was Hobson who had held up and shot Bill Terry, then searched his shack for the gold cache. Failing to find it, he'd devised a scheme to worm the information out of its owner. Lonnie had been taken in by Hobson's claim of remorse and eagerness to save his victim's life. Out of a distorted sense of loyalty, and because of a gambling debt, he had been an easy dupe, in turn making one of her.

Hobson had known Terry would worry about claim jumpers, had gambled that he would entrust the saving of his gold to the girl he believed had saved his life. That was the reason for his insistent instructions . . . *Win his confidence. . . . Draw him out.* He had not dreamed that Karen might not feel free to share Terry's secret even with Lonnie, or that she would take upon herself alone the responsibility of moving the gold to a new place of safety. Fortunately, it had not occurred to him, either, that might have been the object of her trip tonight.

Hobson's curse jarred her back to the present. His face was turning grey. Blood continued to drip from his fingertips.

"He's getting worried, Karen," said Glen

unexpectedly. "And you can't blame him. He knows there's an artery sliced, the way the blood's pouring down his arm."

"Artery?" Karen started to make a correction and caught herself as her eyes met Glen's. He had something in mind. Hobson's quick, fearful glance at his injury gave her the clue to what it was.

"Maybe you'd better tend me right away, Karen," said the latter uneasily. "Terry can stand with his face to the wall. And don't either of you get ideas. One crooked move and I start shootin'." The bore of his gun moved to cover Karen. "Maybe you think you'll have a chance to make me pass out or something, but—"

"Don't make him sweat so!" broke in Glen derisively. "Sit him down on that empty bunk where he can watch us both, and get to work on him. I never could stand the sight of blood—even snake blood!"

"You won't be so cocky in a little while!" began Hobson furiously.

BUT KAREN cut him off. She'd got Glen's message that time, and a single glance brought enlightenment. It was only a slim chance.

"You'd better sit down before you keel over!" she declared. Ignoring the gun pointed at her heart, she pressed Hobson back towards the empty bunk. He braced himself when he felt it behind him.

"Remember—be damn careful!" he warned. "Because I can—"

"Sit down!" repeated Karen impatiently, and gave him a little push.

Hobson sat heavily—and was lifted instantly, involuntarily, back to his feet by the sharp, totally unexpected stab of knitting needles. For one wild, uncontrollable second he was thrown off guard. The barrel of his gun tilted ceilingward.

And that one second proved all that Glen needed. He reached the enemy with a headlong dive. From there on it was easy, for not even Hobson's ferocity could make up for an injured arm and the strength that loss of blood had drained out of him.

"I'd like to give you more—for Dad!" panted Glen, standing over him. "But it will have to wait."

It was the next day before everything could be cleared up. By then Hobson had been turned over to Sheriff Barker, to be dealt with in miners' court. A relieved, happy Bill Terry again started to mend. A repentant, subdued Lonnie verified the facts that Karen had guessed.

Hobson had gone with him that evening to check on Karen's progress with the wounded man. Finding her gone had set him wild. It seemed he'd thought at once that Terry must have said something to make Karen realize that he, not Lonnie, had shot him. Fearing that Karen had gone for the sheriff, he had dropped all subterfuge and attempted to wring the miner's secret out of him by brute force.

"I saw then the kind of skunk he was, and what a fool I'd been all along," finished Lonnie. "I tried to make him let Terry alone, and he hit me with his gun. The next thing I knew you were there and he seemed to have you, too. I don't know how you turned the tables on him."

"Glen did that," replied Karen. Facing the cowboy, she added curiously. "How did you figure it out anyway? You couldn't have seen knitting needles from where you stood."

"But I could see something red on that bunk," explained Glen gravely. "It reminded me of the red thing I'd seen you knitting when I peeked through your window that first night. I didn't know of course whether the needles would actually stick him. But there was no other chance, so I figured it was worth a gamble."

Then his face changed and he seemed to forget that they were not alone. "Worth a gamble," he repeated slowly. "You said that once about Lonnie, Karen, and you were right. I wonder—well, if you could forget how I acted at first maybe you'd decide I'm worth taking a chance on too."

Meeting that dark, humbled gaze, Karen recalled how this cowboy had, even while thinking the worst of her, placed the saving of her life before his own.

"I've decided that already, Glen," she answered softly. "And something tells me I'll never change my mind!"

A Man From Joliet

By Ennen Reaves Hall

The two men rolled out of the saddle

SHERIFF BIGGERS' eyes were like granite chips as he looked at Drew Mason. "Banker Nelson came to me a little while ago about a man to send to Ouray with money," he said softly. "I told him I didn't have a man I'd trust with five thousand cash."

The granite eyes narrowed, and his voice sharpened significantly. "I told him to use the man he already had working for him—you!"

Feeling the skin on the back of his neck prickle and his whole face tighten, Drew studied the lawman. "Why me, Biggers?"

"Well, you work for Nelson. But the outlaws around these parts don't know you, so you're the best man for the job."

Drew took out tobacco and papers and rolled a smoke without taking his eyes off the sheriff's face. He didn't get this. "So?" he prompted softly.

"So Nelson's sending you. Giving you five thousand cash to take to the bank in Ouray. Because I recommended you, Mason. Don't forget that."

Drew pulled in a sharp breath. There was more coming. He could hear the ugly thread of it running through Biggers' voice.

"So what do you want?" Drew asked coolly. Much more coolly than he felt.

"Four thousand of it." Biggers had dropped his voice to a mere whisper. "I'll let you keep a thousand to travel on, Mason. You'll have to travel far and fast."

DREW MASON faced up to the fact that he was setting out to be a man no one could trust, and that wasn't the fate he wanted

Drew laughed, the sound as sharply bitter as acid. "You're generous. But suppose I don't want to travel? Suppose I prefer delivering that money and coming right back to my job in the bank here?"

"You're not that kind of fool." Biggers sounded very sure. "Think I don't know you, Johnny Drew? Calling yourself Mason don't change things any. You're wanted in Illinois to finish a rap you left hanging there when you skipped out. I've known that these four months past. Want I should tell Nelson?"

So there it was. Somehow Drew had known that was coming. Nausea rose in him at the thought that this was the end of the new life he'd made for himself in the wilds of mountainous Colorado. He hadn't been getting away from things as he'd thought. He'd just been going in a circle, and now he'd soon be back where he'd started from—the gates of Joliet prison.

Drew raised bitter eyes to meet the hard ones watching him. "Why haven't you told Nelson?"

"You wasn't bothering me none, boy. I hadn't any grudge agin you, and I figured the time might come when I could do business with you. Well, it has."

The granite had moved from his eyes into his voice as the lawman went on. "You deliver that five thousand today to Ouray, and you'll sleep in jail tonight. And start for Illinois in handcuffs tomorrow. I wouldn't kick at getting a free train trip a damn bit. But natcherly I'd prefer getting four thousand wagon wheels."

Drew knew when he was licked. He had no choice but to do what this crooked lawman told him. Five years in Joliet had been enough. He didn't want any more.

"Looks like you got me," he said dully. "How do you figure we should work it?"

Biggers smiled his satisfaction. "It's all cut and dried, boy. Nelson's sending you right out, with the cash in your saddle bags. It's only about four hours' ride, so you'll be expected around noon. But knowing the things that can happen in the mountains, it ain't likely they'll get to stewing before

closing time around three. So that'll give you good time."

Drew nodded, said curtly, "Go on."

"Well, about halfway, you remember, is an old mine diggings. Right where the trail leaves the canyon and turns to skirt the Uncompahgre Gorge. I'm riding on there now, and I'll wait for you. After we split I'll show you a way out of the canyon that nobody knows. You make Gunnison and get a train before we get that far looking for you."

IT SOUNDED simple enough, but it wasn't what Drew wanted. The bitterness of his thoughts must have been reflected in his face, for the lawman said sharply: "I'm giving you a break, man, and you damn well know it. What the hell else do you want?"

What did he want? Drew knew the answer to that. He wanted to go on feeling like a man among men, free to stop in after work for a drink at the Silver Dollar Saloon and kid with the barman and any others who happened to be there; then go to his room for a bath and a clean shirt and tie—the collar and tie were important, for in Joliet men didn't wear them. He wanted endless suppers at the long boarding house table, where miners joshed each other and the pert waitresses—not where men wolfed their food silently, always conscious of the grim-faced guards who watched them. Then he wanted those long walks in the early twilight with Janie Nelson. . . .

More than anything he wanted those walks and Janie, with her honest blue eyes that seemed to see right through a man's mind

But what the hell? That was over now, anyway. Janie was too good for a man from Joliet. He should never have let that friendship start. Would she be hurt when she knew? Would there be scorn or contempt or heartbreak in her violet blue eyes? He'd never know, Drew thought, while the knife twisted deeper in his heart. He hadn't the courage to stay and see.

"Well?" Biggers' voice was sharply impatient. "If you're thinking up ways of double crossing me, Drew, you're wasting time. Nobody would believe a thing you'd say when I sprung your record. Arrested three times for petty thievery before getting mixed up in a train robbery where two men were killed. Think anybody'd believe you if you told about this?"

Drew knew they wouldn't. He should know. Nobody had believed him five years before, not even his family. Because he'd been a wild, rebellious kid all his life nobody would believe he hadn't been with that outlaw gang when they robbed the train—not after they found the empty express cash box hidden in his room. The man who'd left it there was gone, and Johnny Drew's word wasn't worth much. It still wouldn't be.

"Okay," he said dully. "But suppose Nelson sends somebody with me?"

"He won't. We talked that over and decided there's no risk. I told him I'd have you watched to be sure you weren't followed out of town. But all my deputy will do is be sure you take the right road out of town."

Drew didn't miss the veiled threat. Turning toward the bank, his feet were like lead, almost too heavy to pick up and put down. But no heavier than his heart. His six months in Silverton, Colorado, had been a new way of life but had led only to a box, a dead end. With the thousand he could go somewhere and start all over again, but there wouldn't be Janie. Again he tried to put her out of his mind, knowing she should never have been in it.

Ed Nelson, a quiet, sharp-eyed man, looked up as Drew came into the bank cage. "I've a special job for you today, Drew."

Then he went on to explain that their related bank at Ouray, new mining settlement about twenty-five miles across the mountains, was in difficulties. They'd had an unexpected run, and if it continued they'd be ruined unless funds reached them at once. Word had come last night, by way of an outbound freighter, to get five thousand cash there by noon. It was three days before the mail rider was due, and the money must go out at once. Nelson had an important business deal on that morning or he'd go himself. But his fastest horse was saddled and waiting and the money in the saddle bags. Would Drew start now?

DREW nodded, words sticking in his throat like hard wood chips. He couldn't meet Nelson's sharp eyes, not even when the older man put his hands on Drew's shoulder almost affectionately.

"I'm trusting you, Drew," he said quietly. "Not every man I'd trust like this, but I pride myself I know a man when I see one. I've never gone wrong on one yet."

But he'd gone wrong this time, Drew was thinking as he forked the horse and rode away. Damn Nelson, anyway! He could have left off that stuff about trusting Drew. It was all just talk, anyway, to make Drew feel important. He tried to laugh as he thought of how Nelson would have talked if he'd known about Joliet, but the laugh was sharp-cornered, and stuck in his throat.

A voice calling his name jerked Drew out of his ugly thoughts. With a start he realized he was passing Nelson's house and that Janie stood by the picket gate, waving to him.

"Drew!" Janie's voice held a shining note that matched her bright hair. "Aren't you going to stop long enough to say good-by?"

Drew pulled rein and swung down to stand beside her. "I'm just going to Ouray," he said, the sickness back in him at sight of her, "on business for your father."

"Yes, I know," she said softly. "Drew, I'm very proud that Father trusts you like this. Will you be back tonight in time for our walk?"

"No," he said curtly. Almost harshly. "Not tonight, Janie."

Her eyes widened as though she'd looked inside him and seen all the wretchedness there. "Tomorrow night then, Drew?"

He hesitated, wanting desperately to get away before he lost complete control of himself. "Maybe."

"Drew," the blue eyes were watching him sharply now, "aren't you sure? Don't you want to come?"

"Of course, Janie." He turned and fumbled with the bridle bits, making an unnecessary adjustment. "You know I want to come. It's just that—well, I might not get back."

"Oh, I see." She laughed, but the puzzled, hurt note was still in her voice. "You think you might want to stay a day or so and sample Ouray liquor. Or is it a girl, Drew?"

"No," he said, harshly. "There's no girl. Janie, I've got to go."

She suddenly moved very close, so that the fragrance of her hair was intoxicating. "Good-by, Drew?"

There was a subtle invitation in her voice, and when he looked around the invitation was plain in her face. Only half smothering a groan, Drew caught her to him and kissed her, hard. Into the kiss went everything he wanted to say and couldn't, and he knew Janie felt it all. The glow in her eyes told him that as she half whispered, "Drew, do you—"

He didn't let her finish. Vaulting into the saddle, he called a choked, "Good-by, Janie!" hardly aware of the finality he put into the phrase. He rode away without looking back, for he didn't want to see the hurt that would be in her eyes. She had so obviously expected him to speak of love. She had a right to expect it, after a kiss like that. But Drew Mason—or Johnny Drew—had no right to say such words. A man from Joliet—or a man bound for Joliet—whichever he was, it shut Janie out of his life.

AT THE edge of town he looked back and saw the rider following him leisurely, caught the glint of the sun on a star. Biggers' deputy, he thought bitterly, making sure Drew took the road to Ouray. Once on that canyon trail there'd be no other route he could take until he met Biggers. High, steep-sided mountains walled the trail almost to Ouray. Biggers had said he could show him a way out, but he was asking a high price for the information—four thousand dollars that belonged to the one man who had ever trusted Johnny Drew!

For most of the way the trail was on the level of the canyon floor. But just a few miles from the old mine diggings where Biggers waited, the canyon narrowed until the river completely filled it. Then the trail climbed halfway up the mountain slope, following a shelf of rock and earth that clung precariously to the mountainside.

Riding that high shelf, Drew looked down at the rushing river below him, then up at the almost sheer wall rising above him. Again he thought that riding this trail was like riding the barred corridors of Joliet prison. At one end a deputy watched, at the other end, Biggers. And no chance for escape in between.

Of course a man might possibly climb that wall above him, just as men had climbed Joliet walls. Over there was a break made by a snow slide where a man might find footing, though risky enough. But if he made it where would he be? Marooned on top of a treeless mountain, with little chance of getting down to another trail. And afoot, which would make his capture certain—if he lived to be taken.

No, there was nothing for Johnny Drew to do but ride where he was told and be grateful if he were shown a way out. Even a dishonorable way.

Approaching the mine shaft he saw Biggers waiting, caught the glint of sun on gun barrel and knew he must have been riding in the lawman's gun sight for some time. Biggers wasn't giving him even a fighting chance of getting through with the money. Defeat like acid in his whole being, Drew pulled rein and waited for Biggers' next move.

Eyes glinting avidly, Biggers motioned toward the saddle bag with his gun. "Quick, let's have it and you get on your way. Like I said, I'll show you a way out."

The hidden trail Biggers had promised could hardly be called even that. It was just a narrow fissure that split the mountain and was reached only by climbing the rocky bed of a tumbling mountain stream. It proved barely wide enough for a horse to squeeze through, but the sheriff had assured him it widened later on and finally came out on the other side of the mountain where the trail to Gunnison lay.

Drew felt trapped, after he'd finally gotten his horse up the steep stream bed and into the narrow passage. Mounting, he looked back over his shoulder to see the lawman settling down with his cocked gun to be sure he kept going. Like a cat at a rat hole, Drew thought bitterly, and knew the lawman's finger itched to snap that trigger. The slightest doubt that Drew didn't welcome this chance of escape, and lead would follow him.

WITH the thousand dollars feeling like lead in his coat pocket, Drew urged the reluctant horse into the narrow, rock-strewn passage. When the animal snorted nervously he spoke soothingly to him.

"I don't blame you for not wanting to go, old fellow. It's not the way I want to go, either, but a skunk back there with a gun doesn't leave us any choice."

But now that the actual betrayal of Ed Nelson's trust—and of Janie's—had taken place, Drew felt hollow inside and rotten outside, like an old log that's fallen into decay. He'd never feel clean or decent again, he knew.

Suddenly it came to him what it would mean, living with a self he despised. It would be like being in prison still. He could walk the streets apparently free, but all the time he would be shut in, eating, sleeping, working with a craven coward he hated—himself.

In Joliet it had been bad enough but always there'd been the knowledge of his innocence to sustain him. Because of the injustice he had hated others, but not himself. Only now did Drew realize that a man hadn't reached the bottom until he despised himself. He was there now, but he wouldn't stay there.

Swearing helplessly, he pulled the horse to a halt. He wasn't going through with it. Better to take the bullet Biggers had waiting for him.

But he couldn't turn. The fissure was too narrow, and he'd gone too far in. He could only leave the horse and go back on foot to fight it out with Biggers. A losing fight, he knew for certain.

Unless he could take the lawman by surprise! On the heels of that thought another struck him, bringing an upsurge of hope. He was looking up at the narrow streak of blue sky that showed, and saw the fissure was much narrower high above him, the sides almost meeting in one place. If a man could climb that rocky wall he might cross the narrow mountain to the point he had no-

ticed above the shelf trail, where the snow slide had made a grooved path. And if he got there ahead of Biggers, who would no longer be watching for him, he could get the drop on the lawman, recover the money and ride on to Ouray. And to hell with what Biggers did after that! It wouldn't be any worse than what Drew had already done to himself. It was worth a try, even though he knew that the mountain top would be broken by the jagged peaks which had given the range the name of the Needles, and that attempting to cross would be dangerous, if not impossible.

Almost at the top of the fissure a jutting rock promised help. Standing in the saddle, Drew was able to loop his rope over it after several attempts. Elated, he grasped the rope firmly, found a toehold in the rocky wall, and started his precarious climb upward.

A small stone, dislodged by his foot, struck the waiting horse. With a snort he took off, the flapping stirrups adding to his alarm. In a few seconds he had disappeared around a curve, as though swallowed up by the mountain. Drew had a sinking feeling, realizing what the loss of the horse could mean. If he failed to intercept Biggers, he had cut off his only chance of escape. But he meant to catch Biggers. . . .

THE CLIMB turned out not so hard until he neared the top, where the sides of the fissure almost met. Then he had to turn loose the rope, get a firm toehold, and grope above his head with both hands for the top of the rocky roof. When he'd gotten a good grip he had to let his feet leave the inwardly sloping wall, while for seconds that seemed like eternities he swung there above nothing, feeling his hands slipping off the rock.

Then, by the superhuman effort men are capable of making when their lives hang by a thread, Drew hoisted himself until his shoulders touched both sides. Another breathless moment of agonizing effort and he pulled himself through until he lay prone on his stomach on the ledge.

He wanted just to lie there and be sick, but there wasn't time for that. Biggers would be leaving his rat hole by now and in another thirty minutes would be passing the high point on the shelf trail. And Drew saw that he wasn't yet at the mountain top.

The rest of the way he followed the path cut by a mountain rill. Sometimes it was so steep he had to lie on his stomach in the icy water and literally crawl. But in another ten or fifteen minutes he could stand upright and look down through needle-like crags to the gleam of water far below in the canyon.

But not, he quickly discovered, at a point where he dared risk descent. He had no rope now, for he'd had to leave it dangling down that fissure. The snow slide was his best bet, and he started looking for it, carefully avoiding snow patches that might cover deep gaps in the mountain top. Before long he saw the place and felt again that he could worm his way down to a point where a huge boulder overhung the trail. That would prove an ideal spot to waylay a man.

Almost at the depression, Drew stopped in dismay. At his feet yawned a deep crevice, wide enough to defy a man to risk jumping it. It looked exactly as though the mountain had broken into a wide, derisive grin, and down there in the bottom of the crevice was the gleam of white teeth, the encrusted snows of many winters.

Looking over his shoulder, Drew saw a slowly moving horse starting up the shelf trail. Biggers wasn't hurrying, he thought with renewed hope. He had probably winded his horse getting to the mine ahead of Drew and now was letting the animal set his own pace. Which was in Drew's favor if he could get across that crevice quickly enough.

There was only one way to do it quickly. Clenching his teeth against the fear that pounded in him, Drew backed off to get a running start, and at the edge of the crevice he jumped.

At first, feeling his feet touch earth, he thought he'd made it. Then his feet slipped off and he was going down. Instinctively, he had thrown the upper part of his body forward and his outflung hands grasped the gnarled roots of a stunted piñon. The roots held, and slowly, painfully, Drew pulled himself up until he sprawled over the bush to safety.

Time was short now and he couldn't hurry down that steep depression, unless he wanted to roll clear to the river. He could only get down on his stomach and worm his way down, praying wordlessly that he could still beat Biggers to the rock. Finally his toes touched the boulder, and he just had time to fling himself flat when Biggers rode into sight.

BIGGERS was riding loose reined, rolling a smoke and looking very pleased with himself and the world when Drew's voice made him stiffen in the saddle and the cigarette fall from his fingers.

"Hands high, Biggers! Try to run for it and you'll stop a bullet!"

Biggers pulled rein, then raised his hands as he tried to locate Drew. "Where in hell are you, Mason? And what do you want?"

"That four thousand dollars," Drew said, steadily. "Throw down your gun, then the money. Then get off your horse and start walking to Silverton. I'm riding him on into Ouray."

Biggers laughed, a short, ugly sound. "The hell you are! If you want that money, Drew, you'll have to come and get it. And maybe I better remind you of what will happen if you shoot me. A necktie party for Johnny Drew, for my deputy knows all about you and why I rode out this way to watch to see you didn't try getting away with that money. Taking it on in now won't prove anything except you got scared after shooting me when I tried to stop you. See what I mean?"

Drew saw, all right. It looked as if, after all his efforts, he was in the same old trap. With this difference. He was no longer afraid of what would happen to him. Because Biggers didn't know that, Drew had the advantage.

Keeping the gun on Biggers, Drew carefully worked himself into a crouching position. "Throw away your gun, Biggers," he warned again.

But the lawman's crooked teeth gleamed in a snarl. "Come and get it, Johnny Drew," he taunted. "I dare—"

He never finished. Drew had leaped from the rock, landing astride Biggers' back. The two men rolled out of the saddle and hit the dirt of the trail as the startled horse broke and ran.

Biggers was heavier than Drew, and Drew had the further handicap of being under the lawman when the two hit the trail. The jar almost knocked him breathless and broke his hold on the other man. Before he could recover Biggers had twisted about and was raining blows in his face with murderous fury.

Blinded by pain, Drew tried futilely to cover his face. Then the other man's weight left his body and Biggers kicked him in the side. "Now get up, you two-timing thief, and we'll see who's giving the orders!"

DREW looked up into Biggers' gun, then made a move as though to get to his feet. Instead, both booted feet shot out, catching the lawman in the stomach and landing him ten feet away on his back.

But Biggers kept his gun and fired once as Drew lunged for him. The bullet missed and Drew had his gun arm before he could finger the trigger again.

But the burly sheriff knew some tricks, too. While Drew put all he had into the effort to keep that gun from turning on him, Biggers whipped his legs up and got a scissors grip about Drew's body. As the crushing grip threatened to cave in his ribs, Drew managed to sink his teeth deep into the lawman's hand that held the gun. Blood spurted, and the gun dropped. In the brief flash of pain that took Biggers off guard, Drew threw himself sideways and broke the hold of the sheriff's legs. He rolled free and got to his feet just in time to meet the savage rush of the other.

It was toe to toe fighting now, and Biggers' big fists seemed packed with lead. He kept pounding at Drew's face and head, but his blows left his own body unprotected. Without trying to cover his face, Drew went after Biggers' midriff, knowing that would be the beefy man's weakness. Biggers' breath began coming in rasping moans and grunts, and Drew knew he could have him to his knees in another moment. But just then he stepped on a stone, lost his balance and went down under one of Biggers' hard rights to his chin.

The sheriff was on him instantly and the men rolled, still fighting furiously, to the very edge of the trail. Drew knew it was the edge, for he could feel the earth crumpling away under them and one of his feet found nothing under it.

At that some instant he realized that Biggers wasn't doing much fighting. He had gone to pushing. Rolling to the safe side, he was slowly but surely pushing Drew off the trail to the rocky river bed below. And Drew had but little strength to fight back.

"Stop it, Biggers!" a voice ordered. "Stop it or I'll shoot!"

The lawman straightened up, and Drew rolled away from the crumbling edge of the trail and sat up to see Ed Nelson and Janie staring at him. Nelson held a gun, his face inscrutable.

"Now then," Nelson said, "what's all this about?"

Biggers spoke up quickly. "He'd have left the country with your money by now if I hadn't stopped him, Nelson. I just learned a while ago that Drew Mason is really Johnny Drew, wanted in Illinois to finish a sentence for highway robbery. So I took after him and was going to bring him in."

NELSON interrupted, speaking slowly, "Funny you just learned about that this morning, Biggers. I knew it three months ago when I got a bunch of notices from the East. I wrote the sheriff back there and asked about Drew, seeing he was working for me. He wrote back to say there was a lot of doubt about the boy's guilt, and he reckoned he could get a parole for him if I'd recommend it. I've been waiting, watching Drew to decide for sure if he could be trusted. I was pretty certain of it when I called on him this morning to take the money to Ouray, and I thought if I should prove wrong it'd be worth it to know before Janie got too serious."

"You were dead wrong." Biggers fairly smacked his lips over the words. "Drew was fixing to get away with your money."

Janie slid off her horse and ran to stand beside Drew. "I don't believe you," she said, hotly. "If Drew meant to run away, why didn't he get any further than this in nearly four hours?"

Drew Mason got slowly to his feet.

"Biggers is right about one thing, Mr. Nelson. You were wrong about me. I'm no good and a weak coward for I almost let Biggers sell me the idea of running away."

Then he told his story, disregarding Biggers' vehement denials. At its conclusion he said, tiredly, "You can prove all this by searching both of us. I've got one thousand of your money and he's got four."

Biggers made a sudden dive for his gun on the ground, but Janie was quicker. She got it first and held it on him while her father recovered his money.

"Maybe you can catch your horse," Nelson said coldly. "And when you do my advice is to keep traveling. We don't want your kind around this mining country, and any time you show your face in either Silverton or Ouray you're asking for trouble."

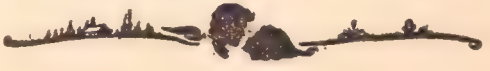
As Biggers hurried away Nelson turned to Drew. "I'm glad I listened to Janie when she insisted something was wrong with you, Drew. Something about the way you said good-by worried her, so as soon as I could close the bank we followed. Now she can ride with me and you can take her horse and get on to Ouray."

Drew could hardly believe his ears. "You mean you're willing for me to take that money after what I've told you?"

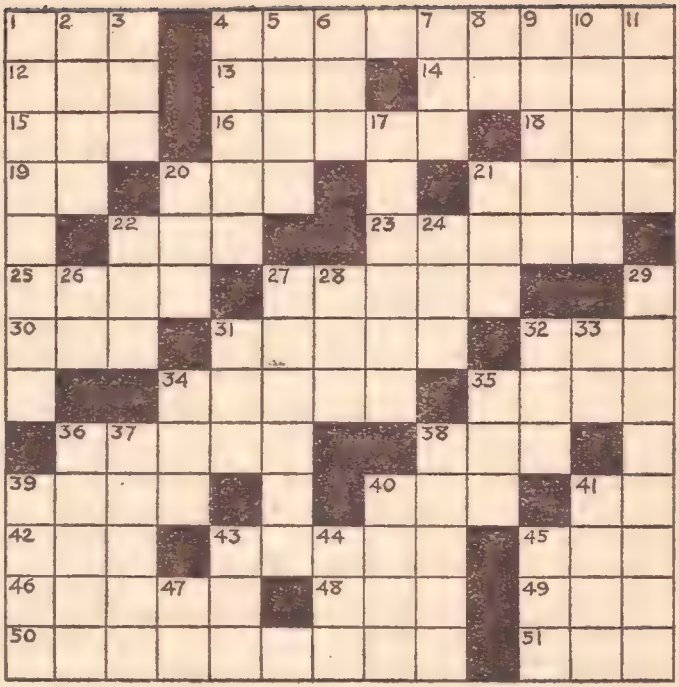
Ed Nelson looked up at the jagged peaks above them, then back at Drew's bloody, bruised face. "Because of what you've told me, Drew. A man is a man, if he's from Joliet or wherever. It's easy to get off on the wrong trail, but sometimes it takes guts to back track. I guess if you hadn't had what it takes you'd have kept on going."

He went over and put the money into Janie's saddle pockets, then mounted his own horse again. Wheeling the animal, he said over his shoulder, "Seems Janie didn't like that other good-by you said, Drew. If you hurry you can put in what you left out this morning."

Drew knew what he meant. Eager as he was to be on his way to Ouray, it wouldn't take long to kiss a girl and say three words.



THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



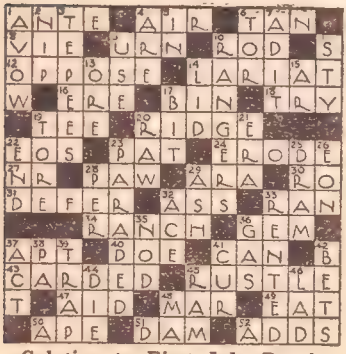
The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. Male sheep
4. Cowboys' bedroom
12. To utilize
13. Raw metal
14. A fall flower
15. Coterie
16. Deputy
18. Thick viscous liquid
19. Tantalum (abbrev.)
20. Metric land measure
21. Household animals
22. Movable cover
23. Affirms
25. Wide-mouthed jug
27. Feeble-minded person
30. To soak flax
31. Tendon
32. Skill
34. Whiter
35. Flat surface
36. To frown
38. Indistinct
39. Fish
40. Wet soil
41. Spelling (abbrev.)
42. Two thousand pounds
43. Haughty
45. Consumed
46. To make amends
48. Fermented liquor
49. Roll of money (slang)
50. Creates
51. Before

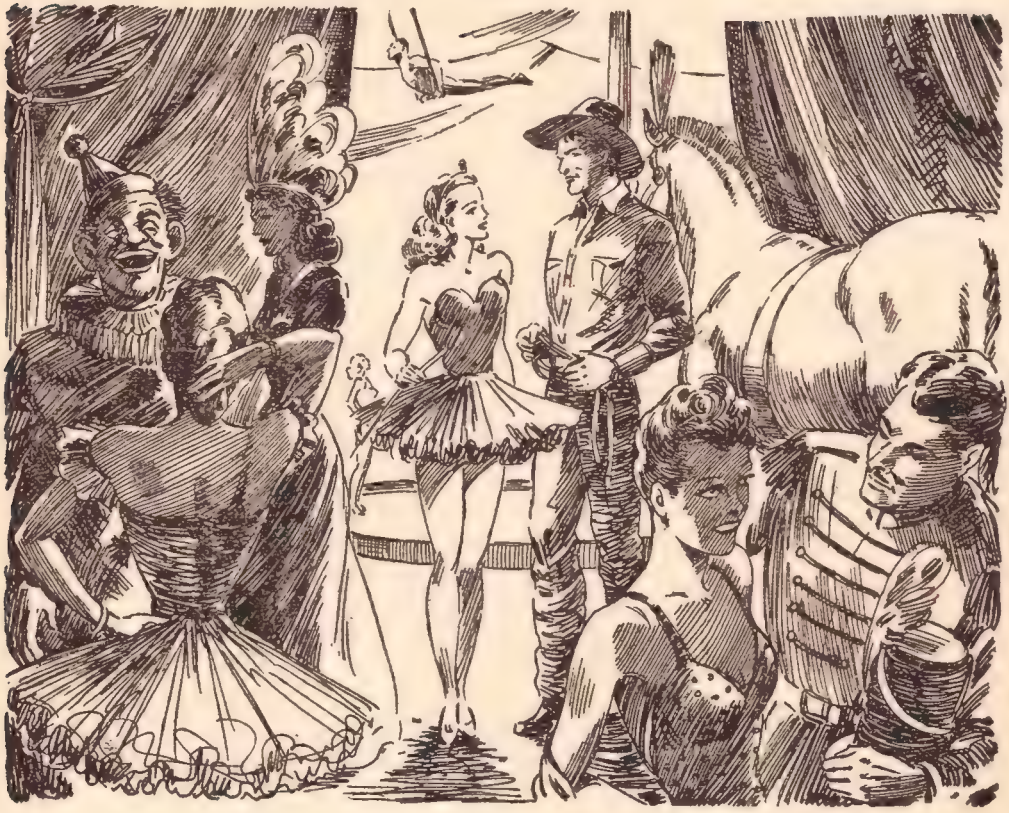
DOWN

1. Cattle thieves
2. On the ocean
3. Encountered
4. Piece of sawed lumber
5. To incite
6. Born
7. Head covering
8. Bone
9. Speak
10. Chairs
11. Makes a mistake
17. Closer
20. Ventilate
21. Small enclosure
22. To allow
24. A solemn promise
26. Personal pronoun
27. One who grinds grain
28. Single
29. To run in panic
31. Cutting tool
32. To furnish with weapons
33. Musical note
34. Pea hull
35. Help
36. Young hog
37. Ecclesiastical law
38. City-bred persons (slang)
39. Male deer
40. Domestic animal
41. Celestial body
43. Through
44. A cereal grain
45. Reverence
47. Compass point



Solution to First July Puzzle

Cowboy Under Canvas



By Tess Trahern

EVEN ZEKE, to whom it happened, would never have supposed a woman's scream could turn a cowman into a circus roustabout

OVER the pitch of the barkers—"Step right up, everybody, and take a chance—" over the laughter of the crowd that thronged the circus grounds, even over the high-pitched tootling of the calliope, Zeke Talbot was aware of another sound, thin and piercing. He listened for a moment, and it vanished. He shrugged. Probably some defect in the works of the merry-go-round, he thought. But could a mechanical squeak hold a note of terror, as that faint scream had seemed to?

No one else had heard it apparently, but that didn't surprise Zeke. He'd often noticed that life on the range had made his eyes sharper and his ears keener than townfolks'.

He pushed through the crowds flowing toward the big top. The main show was about to begin, people were deserting the freaks and the midway, but Zeke had had enough noise and tinseled gaiety. It was time to be heading home for the ranch if he expected to be there before midnight.

He went through the gate and past the

posters covered with clowns and elephants and trapeze artists. A quirk of amusement curved his firm mouth as he glanced at an artist's dream of a bareback rider, a girl in spangles with long blond hair streaming, as she and her horse gracefully cleared an impossible jump.

"No hands!" he chuckled to himself. "I'd like to see her do that."

Then he heard the sound again. This time there was no mistaking it—a woman's desperate, terrified shriek.

He began to run toward a group of small tents which seemed to be the performers' living quarters, quite dark now except for the glow cast from the lights in the big top. But suddenly he saw a figure running toward him, a small figure with long hair flying behind. She saw him and hesitated for a moment, faced with a new fear, turning like an animal at bay, looking for escape. But when he was close enough for her to see him, she began to run again, toward him.

"Get me out of here," she gasped. "Please! He'll kill me." She grabbed his arm, pulling him in the direction from which he had come.

Zeke was a man who made up his mind fast. He put one arm around her waist and made for the parking lot where he'd left his roadster. His strides were so long and swift that her feet touched the ground about once to three of his paces. He slowed down a little when they reached the maze of cars.

"Is anyone following us?" she asked.

"I don't think so. Anyway, we'd be pretty hard to find here," he replied, weaving his way through the narrow lanes between the automobiles.

When he found his car and opened the door, she got in quickly and crouched low on the seat. Zeke eased his long legs under the steering wheel and faced her.

"Now," he said, "what's this all about?"

"Take me away," she panted. "I'll tell you later, only please, take me away now."

Well, Zeke thought, I've gone this far, I might as well see it through. If it's a con game, she's got a novel approach.

He ground the starter and drove out of the parking lot, and although the town was only a few minutes away, he headed through habit for the route to his ranch. The girl slumped in the seat, her head in her hands, and that long hair, which he saw now was as blond as the girl's in the poster, fell over them in golden ripples.

When they had reached the main road, Zeke said, "Well, how about it? Who are you?"

"I'm Flossie. My real name—well, it doesn't matter. I'm—I was a rider in the circus."

"The girl on the poster!" muttered Zeke, half to himself.

"Yes, I posed for it. Just my face, of course. Nobody could ride the way the artist painted that picture."

"I noticed that," said Zeke. "But what's the matter? What are you running away from?"

"My—the circus. Everything. It's a long story." Suddenly she lifted her head and peered out the window. "Where are you taking me?"

"Any place you want to go within reason," answered Zeke. "Right now I'm headed for my ranch. I'll take you there if you like." He smiled at her startled glance. "Oh, it's all right. My mother lives there, too. She'd be happy to put you up for the night."

Flossie stared at his profile in the slow flashes of the oncoming headlights. "You mean, you'd take me to your home without knowing anything about me? *Me,* a circus rider?"

"Well," said Zeke, "I figure you'll tell me a few things before we get there. But I'll buy you a cup of coffee first."

They were approaching a flashy BAR-B-Q sign. Zeke pulled into the driveway and waited a few minutes to see whether any of the other cars on the highway slowed down or followed them, before he opened the door. "You wait here," he said. "I'll bring you some coffee. Want anything to eat?"

"No thanks. . . . You're very nice. What's your name?"

"Zeke. Zeke Talbot." He smiled at her and went into the restaurant.

He was whistling when he came out, gingerly carrying two very hot containers of coffee.

"Open the door, Flossie," he called out

as he approached the car. "I need a third hand—Flossie!" He settled the coffee precariously on a fender and opened the door himself. The seat was empty. "Flossie!" he shouted again, but he heard nothing except the noise from the diner and the sound of tires on the highway.

ZEKE leaned against the car to think. Why the deuce had she run off? And how far did she think she could get on foot—unless she hitched a ride with someone else? He ran out to the road, but there was no sign of her. Well, this was the queerest thing in the whole queer business. He would have sworn she was sincerely pleased about coming to the ranch. He walked back to the car and stumbled on the uneven gravel. He glanced down at his feet. The gravel certainly was kicked up. Kicked up—by small feet struggling to run away from an assailant?

Zeke slid into the driver's seat, started the car and turned back in the direction from which he had come. He parked his car in the circus lot again and went to the ticket window.

"Is the bareback act on yet?" he asked the girl.

"Nope. Ought to be any minute now."

He shoved a dollar through the grille, accepted his ticket and made for the big top. As he entered, the attendants were setting up fences for the riders to jump. The band switched abruptly from slow trapeze music to a fast hunting song, and seven riders—four men and three girls—burst into the ring. They galloped around, taking some mediocre jumps.

"Mummy," Zeke heard a small boy beside him ask, "where's Flossie? Billy was here yesterday and he told me she jumped through a flaming hoop."

"I don't know, dear. Maybe she's sick. Look, here come the clowns."

That was enough for Zeke. He left his seat and made his way toward the cluster of small tents behind the big one, where he had first seen Flossie. Most of them were dark, but a few glowed from lamps inside. Suddenly a small group of people appeared, walking away from the show. He crouched in the shadows and listened.

"What the hell do you suppose happened to Flossie?" a man's voice said.

"She's not sick," a girl replied. "I looked in her tent just before the act and she wasn't there."

"If you ask me," a higher and brassier voice said, "Mulloy knows something about it."

"Shut up, Rosie. You know he's always snooping around."

They passed out of earshot. Zeke rose from his crouch and started to follow them, but as he passed one of the lighted tents, a big hulk stepped out in front of him.

"No loafers on the circus grounds, Peeping Tom," the man said in a hoarse grating voice.

"I—I was looking for a job."

"Yeah? What can you do?" Apparently strangers looking for jobs was an old story to this man.

"Anything," said Zeke, searching his mind for the jobs he had heard about in circuses. "I can—carry water for elephants."

THE BIG man laughed roughly. "Every sucker wants to do that. Come in here." He opened the flap of the tent, and Zeke stepped in after him. He stood meekly, being scrutinized, hoping desperately that nobody had seen him with Flossie.

"What's your name?" the man asked.

Zeke thought for a minute. No harm in giving his real one, and Flossie would recognize it if she happened to hear it. "Zeke Talbot," he said.

"Know anything about horses?"

Zeke laughed. "I ought to. I'm—I used to be—a cowpuncher."

"H'mm. Well, we need somebody. You might do. We'll try you out till we leave this town after the show tomorrow night. Go down to the horse tent—" he pointed with his thumb—"that way. See Pop O'Regan. Tell him Mulloy sent you."

Zeke glanced over his shoulder as he started out. This Mulloy was a tough hombre, all right. His face was crooked and evil, as though it had often been pushed violently out of shape. His eyes were slits, and his mouth was stained by the cigar butt

that was always clenched between his teeth.

Pop O'Regan, on the other hand, seemed like a good egg. He was an old man who might once have been tall before his legs bowed out like a horse collar. He was glad to see Zeke, too. "Hope you know something about horses, young feller. Last seven hundred stable boys I had never come closer to a horse than a hamburger sandwich, before I took 'em over."

He set Zeke to work, rubbing down the horses, and watched him with shrewd eyes. "Princess over there—" he jerked his thumb—"she's got somethin' plumb queer the matter with her. Look up there on her back. See that sore? Might be this lousy feed Mulloy buys."

Zeke looked Princess over. "This is nothing but a saddle sore," he said.

Pop cackled in delight. "You're all right so far, son. Hand me that currycomb."

As they worked, Zeke listened to Pop talk about horses, the circus, the riders and Jake Mulloy. "If there ever was a mean man, he's the one. Makin' a fortune on this tour in the West, but do you figger he'd buy an extry bag of oats? Not him!"

"Does he own the circus?" Zeke asked.

"Not yet he don't. But he will. Yep, if things go on like he's got 'em goin' now—" Pop sighed—"he sure will. And the day he does, I'm leavin'—after thirty years."

"That girl Flossie. She's very good, isn't she?" Zeke asked.

Pop shot him a look of inquiry. "Now why'd you bring her in at this partic'lar time? Yep, she's good, all right. And not jest on horses, neither. She's a pure gold angel."

"Why didn't she ride tonight?"

Pop shook his head worriedly. "Don't know. Maybe she's up and left. Does seem though that she'd come and say good-by. But after the way she run out of this tent tonight— I jest don't know."

Zeke had a wild impulse to tell his whole story to Pop, but he checked it. He finished rubbing down the horses. "Okay, Pop?" he asked.

"You'll do, son. Come on, and I'll show you where you can hole up for the night."

"Not now. I—I've got to go to town and get my stuff. See you later."

THE SHOW was over, so the circus grounds were darker, although more people were moving about. Zeke made his way very cautiously between the tents until he came to Jake Mulloy's. He lay flat on his stomach and put his ear to the canvas.

Inside it was silent, except for the rustle of papers. Then footsteps approached, a hand shook the flap, and he heard Mulloy's gravelly voice.

"You took your time, Runny. You get her?"

"Sure, out of a roadster at a barbecue stand. License 88V76."

"Who was she with?"

"Dunno. The guy was in the diner. She says she don't know him."

"She better not," rasped Mulloy. "Where is she now?"

"Where you said. But I still think somebody's going to notice a new tent over there and get curious."

"The word will get around that she's sick," said Mulloy, "and I put it up so's she could get some rest by herself."

"Mulloy, the great guy," sneered Runny. "I give her the needle like you said. She's asleep."

"She'll stay that way till morning. You better get over there and hang around, just in case somebody comes smelling around. I'll see her in the morning."

There was the sound of canvas brushing against itself, and then a pause. "Listen, boss," Runny's voice came again, "no rough stuff on her, huh? No accident. . . ."

"What the hell do you mean?"

"I didn't mean nothin' except—"

Zeke was listening so intently that he felt the danger before he had time to intercept it. A leaden weight fell on the back of his neck and pushed him into blackness.

It seemed a long time later that the darkness separated into waves of pain. He was half on his feet, staggering, propelled violently along by someone pulling his arm.

"What's going on around here?" He heard Mulloy's voice dimly.

Another voice, much closer, replied, "It's me, Pete. I'm taking Joey to his tent. He had a little too much—"

"Hitting the bottle again eh?" replied

Mulloy. "Well, get moving, back where you belong, and if you two bums come over this way again in the middle of the night, you're fired."

"Okay, boss," said Pete. Then he said, tugging harder at Zeke, "Come on, Joey. We're going to bed now."

Zeke tried to explain that he wasn't Joey, but it took too much effort. He concentrated on walking where his companion led him.

EVENTUALLY he was pushed onto a cot, and a stinging shot of Pete's private stock was poured down his throat. He coughed, swallowed and found his eyes focusing again, and his brain beginning to function. He looked up into black, sparkling eyes in a small, humorous face.

"First I will tell you why I hit you," said Pete, sitting down companionably on the foot of the cot. "I wouldn't want you to hold it against me. You see, I was walking along, a little closer to Mulloy's tent than was absolutely necessary, but it's wise to keep one's ears open for as much information as possible. . . . You agree with that, I'm sure." He winked at Zeke and giggled.

"Then I saw you. Now I don't mind your eavesdropping on Mulloy. It proves you're against him, and that makes you a friend of practically everybody around here. *Practically* everybody, but not of a guy who was coming toward Mulloy's tent from the other side. I saw him, and I knew he'd surely see you, and he might not take as charitable an attitude as I. Mulloy would've heard me if I'd warned you, so I hit you with my blackjack and pretended you were my drunken partner, Joey." Pete swelled up proudly. "Clever, don't you think?"

"Clever, all right," replied Zeke, touching the back of his head gingerly, "but maybe a little violent. Who are you?"

"A clown. Joey and I are the funniest clowns in the circus, but he is a drunkard, so I am really the best. Now, who are you?"

"I'm—Pop O'Regan's new helper, but—" Zeke paused, uncertain of how far this pixie character could be trusted. "I'm checking on Mulloy."

"Goody!" Pete clapped his hands. "He's a skunk. I'd love to help you." His eyes were round and shining.

Zeke decided he looked like a wrinkled little kid, playing cops and robbers. He also decided if he needed any help, Pop O'Regan was the man to turn to.

"Thanks, Pete, I'll let you know. Say, are there any new tents around here?"

"The second one on the other side of Mulloy's. He just put it up today. I peeked in before the show, but it was empty—just a cot and a chair." He pouted in disappointment.

Zeke swung his long legs to the floor and looked around. It was a large tent with eight cots and trunks in it. "When are all your pals coming back?"

"They'll be out most of the night. Poker game. I have more important things to do."

Zeke grinned. "You sure do. Could I stay here for a while?"

"Lie right down there. I'll stay up and watch." Pete did an exaggerated march and stood like a soldier at attention.

"At ease!" Zeke laughed at the foolish little man. He stretched out again, but he didn't sleep, recalling the conversation he had overheard. One thing was certain. Flossie was really in danger. "An accident," Runny had said. Somehow he'd have to get to Flossie before Mulloy did.

After fifteen minutes, Pete abandoned his stiff sentinel position at the tent flap. He sat down on another cot, and fifteen more minutes put him to sleep.

Zeke chuckled to himself. "Great little guard you are." He walked over to Pete and relieved him of his blackjack. Then he eased outside and looked around. The circus grounds were quiet. Even the poker players were apparently not in this vicinity. He started off cautiously in the opposite direction from Mulloy's tent, then circled around until he figured he was in the right position to approach Flossie's shelter from the other side. Runny must be somewhere nearby, but there was no sign of him.

Zeke crept alongside the tent. He got down on his stomach, frozen still, and after a few moments slid his hand between the canvas and the ground. He raised the side slightly and peered inside. It was pitch

black, but he could hear heavy, rasping breaths, and in between them a soft sighing sound. Two people in there, he thought, Runny and Flossie. If he could only see!

HE DECIDED to risk using his small pencil flashlight. Running the thin beam along the ground, he picked up the legs of a cot, then a chair—and a pair of roughly shod feet.

He squirmed under the side of the tent, feeling his way. When he had reached a spot a few feet from where he figured Runny must be, he rose to a squatting position, holding the dark flashlight in his left hand and clenching his right fist. He snapped on the light for a split second and aimed his fist at Runny's jaw. It connected with a solid thump. Runny let out a slow sigh and crumpled. Zeke turned him over and socked him for good measure with the blackjack. He flipped on the flashlight again and gave Runny the onceover. This was one hombre he wanted to recognize when he saw him coming. Runny was enormous, three inches bigger even than Mulloy in all his dimensions, except his small, weasely head.

Then he went to the cot. Flossie was sleeping deeply, her golden hair tumbled over the blankets. Zeke shook her, but her head wobbled limply. With the help of his flashlight again, he found a pitcher of water. Rough treatment, but necessary. He put one hand over Flossie's mouth and poured the water over her head. He felt the sharp intake of her breath against his hand, and he leaned close to her ear, whispering, "I'm Zeke Talbot, remember? The guy who took you away from here tonight. I want to help you, but you've got to wake up. *You must wake up*. Do you hear me?"

"I—I hear you," she said in a voice drugged with sleep.

"Good. Now you've got to wake up and put on a coat."

Suddenly she sat up. "You—" she said weakly. "You came back! Oh, I never thought you would. I thought you'd just go—to your ranch."

"I'll take you there now. But we've got to hurry. And you'll have to walk. We'll never make it if I carry you."

"Where's Runny?" Flossie asked in terror.

"I knocked him out. Now let's get going."

"Wait, Zeke. I don't want to go now. Oh, it's a long story, but if I go away, Mulloy—he's the man—"

"I know." Zeke cut her explanation short.

"You do? But how— Well, anyway, Mulloy will get the whole circus. Listen, Zeke, stay and help me. I've got to prove that Mulloy is a crook and—a murderer. I'll be all right for a while. He's got to make it look like an accident."

"But what's going on?" asked Zeke.

"It's a long story. Find an old man named Pop—"

"O'Regan?"

"You know *him*, too?" asked Flossie in amazement. "Tell him I said to tell you everything he knows. And now go before Runny comes to. Mulloy will be scared when he finds out someone was in here tonight, but he won't know who. You better keep out of his way. He's suspicious of strangers."

"I'm not a stranger," said Zeke. "I work here—for Pop."

"Oh, Zeke, that's wonderful. You will help me," she begged, "won't you?" She found his hand and pressed it gently. "Please!"

Zeke put his big hand over her small one. "I'm crazy, I guess, but I'll see it through."

He groped his way outside and walked swiftly toward the horse tent. He didn't know where he was to sleep, so he found himself a pile of hay and curled up for the few hours left of the night.

AT DAWN he heard someone moving about. He opened his eyes and saw Pop O'Regan.

"H'mm," said Pop. "Got back early, didn't you?"

"Listen, Pop." Zeke was instantly awake. "Flossie's in a jam." Quickly he sketched out the happenings of the night before.

Pop swore lustily. "I told her last night she'd better get out of here."

"She tried to," answered Zeke, "but now

she wants to stay. She thinks if we help her she can trap Mulloy. She said for you to tell me the whole story."

Pop sat down on the hay beside Zeke. "Well, to start off with, Flossie ain't her real name. She's Elizabeth Giles. Her Dad was Gideon C. Giles, who started this circus and ran it fer the past thirty years. I started out with him as a rider. Why I remember the days . . . well, no time fer that. Old Gideon made a lot of money and he treated all the circus folks fine. Married one of the trapeze artists. That was Flossie's mother. She died when Flossie was ten and Gideon sent her off to school, and I never seen her again till after Gideon—died. Then she come back as a fancy rider. Nobody knew her but me and Mulloy. I guess she had to tell Mulloy to get the job, but I recognized her. She's the spit'n' image of her ma." The old man sighed.

"How did Gideon die?" asked Zeke.

"Now there's an int'restin' question." Pop spat into the sawdust. "This snake Mulloy—he come to work as a box office man about fifteen years ago. A gamblin' man. Now if there was one weakness Gideon had it was fer cards and dice and them things. Never bet much, though, till he started playin' with Mulloy. Lost a pile of money to that guy, and none of us could persuade him that Jake was crooked. Well, the gamblin' losses and the bad years put a whoppin' big mortgage on the circus. Gideon got more and more discouraged and kept turnin' things over to Mulloy. Then about six months ago, a sand bag fell on him where he used to stand at the entrance to the big ring. Flattened him plumb out."

Pop rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He looked Zeke over. "Flossie said to tell you everything, did she? Well, here goes. . . . I looked over the rope that held that sand bag. It had been rubbed and frayed away to look worn out. But our grips are good boys. They wouldn't use a worn out rope. Somebody had fixed that rope to break and fall right where Gideon always stood durin' the acts."

"But who—"

"I'll tell you who. Mulloy's assistant snake, Runny. He worked as a grip 'fore Mulloy found other jobs fer him. And that night he was handlin' the ropes fer the trapeze act. It was right after that it happened."

"Why didn't you report it?"

POP GOT UP and began to pace angrily. "Because the one piece of evidence, that busted rope, was stole out of my tent 'fore I could get it to the police."

"Another thing," said Zeke. "What good would it do Mulloy to kill Gideon? He wouldn't inherit the circus."

"No, but he knew the bank would appoint him manager. Flossie inherited the part that was free and clear, but she's not of age, and the bank's the trustee. Then all Mulloy had to do was keep losin' money. The bank would put the circus into receivership, and he could buy it fer a song. Course, it works out fine—to make the circus lose money, all he has to do is take it out of the till and put it in his own pocket."

"Surely the bank checks up on him?"

"No bank knows beans about runnin' a circus. Mulloy could fix up some phony receipts for new canvas, expensive animal feed, stuff like that he never bought at all. Now if them auditors would ask the circus folks, we could tell 'em plenty. . . ."

"But what about Flossie—I mean Elizabeth?" asked Zeke.

"Might's well call her Flossie. It's safer. Well, Flossie took a notion to join the circus, and that was somethin' Mulloy hadn't figgered on. First he tried to get her to marry him."

Zeke frowned in disgust.

"I agree with you," said Pop. "Then he tried to get her to leave. That's when she begun to suspect somethin' was fishy. So she come to me about it. Last night that was, before the show. Well, maybe I shouldn't of done it, but I told her what I suspicioned about ol' Gideon bein' done in. She was all upset, naturally, and she said she was goin' to find out. I told her not to do anythin' fool-headed, but she run out of here pretty determined." Pop took a plug of tobacco out of his pocket and bit into it. "That's the story, son," he said.

Zeke thought for a minute. "She must have gone to Mulloy's tent to look for

evidence—to look for something that would help her prove either that Mulloy killed her father or that he's now cheating the circus. Then he surprised her, and that's when I heard her scream."

"Maybe she found somethin'."

"No, I think she was just running away when I found her, because she was scared. She wanted time to think. Now she knows we'll fight with her, and she wants to stay. . . . Pop, that girl's in great danger. We've got to watch her every minute. . . . Let's see, what would be the best way to rig up an accident?"

"How about you, son?" Pop asked shrewdly. "Why're you gettin' messed up in this?"

Zeke shrugged his shoulders. "A lady in distress. . . ."

"And a mighty pretty one," added Pop, his eyes twinkling. "Say, are you sure Mulloy don't suspect you?"

"I don't think so. He only saw me when he hired me." He snapped his fingers. "I almost forgot my car. It'll stick out like a sore thumb in the parking lot this morning. I'd better get over there before anyone's up."

Zeke hurried across the circus grounds. In sight of the lot he stopped in amazement. The car was gone. He turned back and came face to face with Mulloy.

"Talbot—that's your name, isn't it? What are you looking for?"

Zeke thought fast. "That water tank, Mr. Mulloy. I don't know my way around very well yet."

Zeke didn't know whether that satisfied Mulloy or not. His slitted eyes were inscrutable. He shifted his cigar around in his mouth and pointed. "It's over there." Then he turned on his heel and walked away.

At mid-morning Flossie came into the horse tent. They looked at Princess' saddle sore together.

Flossie said quickly, "Jake was as nice as he ever can be this morning. Told me he'd been startled when he saw me in his tent last night—that was when I screamed—and he'd treated me rougher than he'd meant to. He said he sent Runny after me because he thought I'd been kidnaped. But he knows I'm onto him, Zeke. He's getting ready to strike."

Zeke took her little hand as he had when she lay on the cot. It was cold, but it held his trustingly. "Stay with people all the time, Flossie. Not me, because I think Mulloy's suspicious." He told her about Runny getting his license number and about his car being missing. "It's just a matter of time before they find out who owns that car, and the worst of it is, Mulloy knows my name. But he'll probably think I've got some official reason for being here. It's a cinch he'd never believe I just wandered into this mess. He's got to work fast."

THE REST of the day was very quiet. Zeke was busy in the stable, and he saw nothing of Flossie until he was bringing the horses to the big top for the evening performance. She walked toward him with the rest of the troupe, dressed in a silver costume, with a short, flared skirt and silver boots.

"You're not going to ride?" asked Zeke in alarm.

"Just the jump through the flaming hoop, Zeke. The kids would be so disappointed if I didn't. Do you think Princess is all right?"

"Sure, the saddle sore is nearly healed. It won't hurt Princess, but I'm worried about you."

"Don't be silly, Zeke. I've done the act a hundred times. Just get Princess saddled. Please!" Flossie smiled at him.

When Zeke went back to the horse tent, he found Princess already saddled. She must have told Pop, too, he thought. He examined the saddle to see that it was securely cinched and had not been tampered with. Everything seemed okay, so he led the horse out of her stall.

When Flossie had mounted and was waiting for her cue, he said, "Be careful—my dear."

She leaned over and put her little silver-gloved hand on his shoulder. "Zeke, you're very good to me. I'm sorry I dragged you into this."

He looked into her eyes. "I'm not," he said after a long moment. "Not any more."

The circus lights dimmed, and the grips

brought out a large paper hoop, to which they set matches. Flossie kicked Princess' ribs and galloped into the ring.

Zeke stepped into the entrance. His hands were cold, and he felt a great knot in his stomach. When Flossie was on the far side, she turned swiftly toward the hoop in the center. The little figure was brightly framed in flames for a second. Then Princess landed lightly, and Zeke was about to let out a sigh of relief, when suddenly the horse screamed in pain and terror, reared wildly and threw Flossie back toward the flames to the ground. The crowd hushed, and then shouted in horror.

A big, awkward figure began to run toward her. Mulloy! Zeke sprinted into the ring, reaching Flossie as Mulloy was starting to pick her up. Zeke grabbed the back of his coat and pulled him back with all his strength. Mulloy stood for a second with the hate and evil in his face intensified by the light of the fire. But that second of hesitation was too long. Zeke jabbed with his left and followed with an uppercut flush on the chin. Mulloy sank to the ground. Zeke didn't give him a glance, and he didn't notice his own bleeding hand. He picked Flossie up and made for the exit before the crowd had really grasped what was going on.

OUTSIDE Zeke saw Pop O'Regan. "Pop, go in there and get that saddle off Princess. Mulloy's out cold, but not for long. I'll meet you at the police station."

He grabbed the reins of another horse from a startled performer. "Help me get Flossie up here," he said. When she was settled against him, he galloped away between the tents to cut across the parking lot.

Flossie stirred in his arms. "Zeke," she said, "what happened?"

"Mulloy rigged up that saddle somehow, so that Princess would throw you on the jump."

"But why? I'm not hurt, just shaken up."

"Mulloy was going to finish the job after he carried you out. I've no doubt the coroner's report would have read something like this: 'Death—accidental. Neck broken in fall from horse.' "

Flossie shuddered and clung closer to him. Suddenly Zeke looked across the tops of the parked cars and stiffened. Runny was standing in the driveway with his back to them, watching the road intently.

Zeke reined the horse back. "Flossie, can you ride?"

"Yes, of course."

"I don't think Runny has seen us." Zeke slipped down from the saddle. "Stay as low as you can, and when you hear me yell, make a dash for it. Get the police."

He circled around the cars to surprise Runny from the opposite direction. Suddenly he let out an ear-splitting shriek and leapt for Runny's shoulders, his arms encircling his neck. They both went down, scrambling in the dust. Zeke heard the pounding of hoofs close to his ear, but Runny heard it too. With a grunt he heaved himself on top of Zeke and reached for his knife. Zeke, sensing the action, rolled swiftly in an effort to pin Runny's knife hand to the ground. He was badly hampered by the hand he had smashed on Mulloy's jaw, and he was fighting for his life, so he drove his knee hard into Runny's stomach. His antagonist groaned and relaxed long enough for Zeke to wrench the knife from Runny's grasp.

He pinned Runny between his knees and said, "The game's up, and if you're smart you'll tell the police all about Mulloy and a frayed piece of rope. Or else you'll have a strong piece of rope around your own neck." He was about to rise when he heard a gravelly voice.

"Knock it off, Talbot. You've done your fighting for tonight." Zeke turned swiftly and faced Mulloy's blunt-nosed .45.

"You've given me too damn much trouble, Talbot. I don't know what the hell you're doing around here, but you're through doing it." Mulloy lifted the gun a fraction of an inch to fire point-blank.

SUDDENLY a shadow on the roof behind him materialized into a small, diving figure. There was a dull thud. Mulloy seemed to lose his balance. He fell

suddenly to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Zeke stooped for Mulloy's gun and then picked up what seemed at first to be a bundle of old clothes. "Pete!" he gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"I followed Mulloy. I'd have been here sooner, but I discovered somebody'd taken my blackjack." Pete looked reproachfully at Zeke through his ridiculous red and white make-up. "I had to take off one of my socks and put a rock in it."

"You sure got here just in time." Zeke turned to Runny who was trying to make a getaway. "No, you don't. Get over there beside your boss, and remember what I said about a rope."

A siren screamed, and a few moments later a patrol car drew up. Flossie jumped out, followed by a couple of policemen, and Pop O'Regan appeared from the circus tents.

"Oh, Zeke, Zeke, are you all right?" Flossie flung herself in his arms.

"Sure, and I'm feeling better every minute," he said as he watched the police herd Runny and drag Mulloy into the car.

Pop held out the saddle. "You had the right dope, Zeke. Mulloy had put a little pill filled with acid underneath the saddle blanket. It was rigged to break when Princess landed after the jump, so the damn stuff ran right into her sore."

"And then he was going to finish me off," said Flossie.

"He sure was." Pop's voice shook with anger. "Mulloy's goin' to have a heap of explainin' to do."

"Especially after Runny gets through talking," agreed Zeke.

They promised to report to police headquarters with the saddle in the morning, and then the bizarre little group headed back for the circus—old Pop, bent over; Pete, skipping along in his absurd clown's costume; and Flossie, all silvery, arm in arm with Zeke.

"You're a mighty handy boy to have around a circus," said Pop.

"I'm pretty handy around a ranch, too," answered Zeke, "and as soon as I get back my car, I'm heading for it."

He and Flossie fell back a step or two behind the others. "I know it's asking a lot, Flossie," he said, "but don't you think you'd like a ranch almost as well as a circus? We have horses there, too."

"Zeke, darling. I'm not really a circus girl, and I'd love a ranch."

"Even with me on it?"

"Especially with you on it. With an honest man in charge the circus will be all right. I guess Pop and Pete can look after it."

Zeke stopped walking and put his arms around her. She lifted her face to his.

Pete glanced over his shoulder at them, standing still, very close together. He capered in delight.

"Come on, you crazy fool," whispered Pop. "They're too busy to laugh at you."

HOW TO BUY A STEAK

You couldn't get a ranchman to buy a tough piece of meat on a bet. He knows too much about beef. When he walks up to the meat counter, he looks for just one thing—fat.

Not that he's interested in eating blubber. But he realizes, as so many people don't, that there is no tender, lean meat that doesn't have plenty of tallow around it. Many buyers at the butcher shop, impressed by that slab of lean, red steak, think they are getting more for their money.

Butchers like to keep the meat in their show-cases looking bright red and fresh. And because this is hard to do, some of them resort to a chemical solution or to certain kinds of lights that will give that illusion. Honest butchers don't like to resort to trick salesmanship, but buyers seem to think that a brownish tinge to a steak indicates that it's ready to spoil.

The rancher, however, knows that the darker meat is often better, due to the tenderizing effect of natural bacteria. Cooking removes any danger to the consumer, and authorities say that naturally aging meat is perfectly safe.

But the color of the *fat* is extremely important. Examine it in daylight, if you aren't sure of the lights in the showcase. If it's yellow, put it back. Tender steaks come from cattle that are fat and getting fatter every day. That tallow will be white and firm. Yellow fat indicates that the animal was losing weight when butchered, a condition which makes the lean meat tough.

Most of us have become careless in our choice of beef during recent years when it's been hard to get. But there's a better day at hand, so it's wise to learn how to buy tender, juicy meat instead of shoe soles.

——*Jess Taylor*

The Cowboy Cook

By Evelyn Jean McCarty

IF A POPULARITY poll of Western characters were taken among readers, the chances are the six-shooter-toting cowboy would be far in the lead. If the same poll were taken among men on the range, the cowboy would be riding hard to keep in the race. Who would be first in the range poll? The boss? No, the cowboy cook.

The cowboy cook is usually not much to look at and perhaps for that reason people pass him up for the more glamorous cowboy. Over his clothes the cook wears a flour-sack apron, the badge of his office. More often than not he uses his battered hat to fan the fire or shelter part of the meal from dust.

Hungry cowboys always find cookie puttering around the campfire boiling coffee in an overgrown pot or tasting son-o'-gun stew to see that it's just right. The cowboys also call him "grub spoiler," "old woman," or "gut robber." But whatever he is called, the cowboy cook has always been prince of the palates at every meal served on the range.

He may have learned to cook in a small café or on a riverboat. Or he may have just thrown some beans in a pot and become cookie. But he's sticking around the range now because he loves it.

The range cook was the true boss on trail drives, according to old-timers. He was

The Cowboys' favorite character is the range cook who keeps a hand's body and soul together

The chuck wagon is the center of activities on trail drives

the only person who could afford to be temperamental. If he was smart, the cook would have every cowboy at his beck and call before many days had rolled by. The cowboys were willing to help. An extra load of wood brought in or a stack of dishes done might mean pie for supper or canned tomatoes for lunch.

If some of the cowhands rode their horses too close to the campfire and scattered dirt into the supper, the cook would throw an empty pan at them. He'd spout uncomplimentary Spanish terms. Or he'd threaten to quit the whole outfit. The cowboy never failed to pay for his action whether he got dust in the meal or made some crack about the food.

One cowboy new to an outfit got into trouble with the cook because he didn't like the tin plates. They'd become rounded with use and looked more like big bowls with rims than plates. When the cowboy set his plate on the ground and put his biscuits on the edge, the plate rolled over and spilled his meal.

The cowboy cursed and threatened to throw the plate into a nearby lake. The cook had not been able to get tinware and scarcely had enough to make the long drive. He stood and fondly patted the six-shooter on his hip.

"Son," he said, "you can cuss the outfit. That ain't my worry. But if you throw that plate into the lake you'll pick it up before it hits the water and bring it back to me."

The cowboy did not complain again on that trip.

The cowboy didn't complain again

ANOTHER cook was more subtle with his punishment. One of his boys decided the sourdough biscuits were too hard and fed his to a dog that had followed the wagon. The next morning the dog died of a different cause.

"Not fit fer a dog. Didn't I tell you, cookie?" the cowboy grinned.

Whereupon the sourdough biscuits became increasingly salty until the other cowhands had to straighten out in the cowboy's mind the fact that the biscuits were good. The cowboy ate six salty sourdough biscuits under the watchful eyes of the other cowboys and complimented the cook. The next meal the salt disappeared from the biscuits.

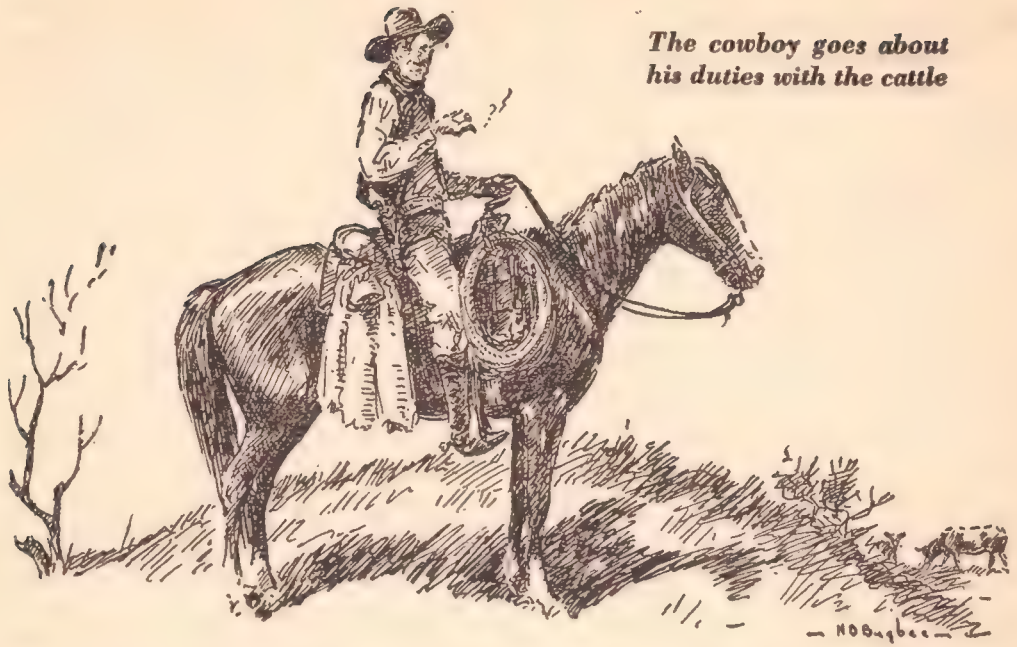
The cook is not always taking it out on the cowboys. They are his boys. He doctors sore throats for them and pours iodine on bad cuts. He will get out of bed to fix a meal for a boy just off the range. He's willing to listen to problems or talk with a lonely cowpuncher or greenhorn.

Because they are his boys, the cook feels free to give them advice on everything from love to home remedies. He'll go out of his way to bake a pie when the going is the toughest. He likes to watch the boys' faces light up when he puts it on their plates.

The pride and joy of every range cook is his barrel of sourdough. Sourdough—made of flour, salt, and water—is the foundation of every meal at the chuck wagon. Sourdough makes its own yeast. The cook spends two weeks seasoning his small keg or barrel and getting a start on the sourdough. When the cook gets his start, sourdough acts like perpetual motion. The cook takes the bubbly sponge-like mixture out of the barrel and adds flour to make a stiff dough. Then he puts enough of the original ingredients into the barrel to replace what he took out.

In this way there is constant natural fermentation kept going in the barrel.

From the dough he makes everything from biscuits to pie crust. Sourdough bread has a lot of flavor and body to it. It is good



The cowboy goes about his duties with the cattle

for use on the range because it requires no fancy cooking.

Some cooks have even slept with their sourdough barrel. It is too precious to lose since it would take two weeks to replace it.

The cook always takes his sourdough barrel with him if he leaves an outfit or is fired.

ONE COOK who quit an outfit because the hands jibed him once too often about letters he got from a "lonely hearts" club, turned over both chuck wagon and sourdough barrel in his rage. He rode off hurriedly, returning in half an hour to get his barrel. He tied it behind him on the horse and left the boys to rustle grub for themselves.

Another cook, enamored of a popular young lady, felt that two days' riding kept him too far away from her. His feeling was crystallized when a cowboy joined the outfit a day or so later and praised the beauties of the girl. The cook immediately emptied his sourdough on the ground, secured the barrel to his saddle, and left at a gallop. He resigned his career as range cook, married the young lady, and made a new start of sourdough for his barrel.

The range cook was more than a temperamental cuss with a sourdough barrel. He was judge and stake-holder for quarrels and bets. He held the unique position of being the only person who had no authority above him. Even the boss respected him. He received from five to twenty-five dollars more pay than the cowhands.

In the cowboy strike of 1883 which brought higher wages to cowboys over the Southwest, there was a special clause in the ultimatum reading: ". . . good cooks shall also receive $50 a month." No provision was made for bad cooks.

It has been said that a cook is a cowhand with a fire who gets as much pay as he would earn if he knew how to cook.

The chuck wagon—the cook's castle—is the center of activities on trail drives and home to the cowhands. It is even a compass, for at night the cook points the tongue of the wagon to the north star.

The chuck wagon is an undersized covered wagon equipped with shelves, drawers, and a coffee grinder. Its back board drops down to make a working shelf in front of the chuck box. A special compartment under the chuck box holds black kettles, Dutch ovens, skillets, and the coffee pot. Water barrels and tool boxes are strapped to the outside of the wagon. Piles of bedrolls are

tossed in on top of provisions in the front.

The precious sourdough barrel has its place under the chuck box. The chuck box is filled with salt, pepper, flour, lemon extract, canned foods, medicine, and the bottle of "special cure" for snakebites.

The wagon, however crude, gets more attention than anything else on the range except the cattle. Mail is delivered there for the cook to give to the boys. The day's work begins and ends around the chuck wagon. There is always a fire nearby and the cook who will chat with a lonely cowboy. At night the cowhands gather around the wagon to sing songs and swap tales.

IT IS the cook who turns night into day on the range. He stumbles from his bedroll into his clothes and flour-sack apron while the sky is still filled with stars. The boys get a few minutes of extra sleep while the cook starts breakfast. The menu —steak, bacon, beans, sourdough biscuits, molasses, and coffee—varies little for any meal. The only difference between breakfast and dinner or supper may be a can of fruit or a piece of pie.

When everything is ready, the cook breathes in the silence and beauty of the early morning. Then he yells:

"Come and get it or I'll throw it out!"

Or more poetically:

"Bacon's in the pan, coffee's in the pot;
Get up and get it—get it while it's hot!"

After a quiet breakfast, the cowboys drop their plates and eating gear into a dishpan called the roundup pan. While the cook cleans the dishes and puts away his equipment, the cowhands hitch mules to the chuck wagon and throw their bedrolls into the front of the wagon. The cook climbs aboard. He may have the reins handed to him if a cowboy is in his bad grace.

While the cowboys go about their duties with the cattle, the cook follows the wagon boss well ahead of the herd. He must locate and have hot food prepared by the time the boys are ready for dinner.

After the noon meal, which is hurried, the cook heads the wagon for night camp. If he drives steadily, he will have an hour or two of leisure before staring the evening meal.

CIMARRON, New Mexico, got its name from a cowboy cook who wanted to use some leisure time.

The cook located camp in early afternoon on a hill above a beautiful valley. He wanted to try his luck at fishing in the stream nearby, so he put a big pot of beans on the campfire. They wouldn't need much watching. At grub time that night, the boys ate fish but had no beans. They were not done. The cook left them over the fire all night. The next day he added water to the beans. On the third day it was time to break camp and move on. The cook crunched a spoonful of the beans, spit them out and kicked over the pot.

"Simmer on, damn ye, simmer on!" he sputtered, and broke camp.

Today a large whitewashed C made of rocks marks the spot where he turned over the beans on the hill which overlooks the quaint, sleepy town of Cimarron.

The range cook is the one who keeps the cowboy going. He is the one who builds a fire from practically nothing and comes up with a good meal. He fights the weather and has been known to have a hot meal ready in a downpour or a raging sandstorm.

He may not look like much and he may be onery, but he's tops to the cowboys. They know he can fix a meal ten feet from hell and a thousand miles from civilization and make it taste like a banquet.

KNOW YOUR WEST

Answers to the questions on page 53

1. Blue columbine. Violets usually bloom in May and June, though they may be found occasionally as late as July in very high altitudes.
2. Snake River in Wyo., Ida. and Wash.; Rattlesnake, Mont.; Rattlesnake Buttes, Colo.; Lagarto (Spanish for alligator), Tex.; Toadlena, N. M.
3. Utah.
4. From dawn till dark.
5. Because the railroad reached Abilene first, Ellsworth and Dodge City in turn later.
6. Mountain lion or bear. Game laws prohibit hunting deer or antelope with dogs in most Western states.
7. Yellowstone Park.
8. He means that the horse is part thoroughbred.
9. "Shakin' hands with grandma" is pulling leather or grabbing the saddle horn when riding a bronc. "Shakin' hands with St. Peter" means to die.
10. Davis, Guadalupe, Maravillas, Chinati, Hueco, Apache, Van Horn, Diablo, Franklin, Chisoe, Barilla, Quitman and Glass Mts.

OUT OF THE CHUTES

FOURTH OF JULY is always a big day in rodeo, and this year the arenas will be busier than ever. Out in Belle Fourche, S. Dak., the historic Black Hills Roundup will be in full swing. Every night of the rodeo—July 3rd, 4th and 5th—there will be open house on Belle Fourche's Main St., with dancing, a carnival, Indian powwow dancing, a cowboy band concert, and general whoopee.

This year's show will be their 28th annual Roundup. Besides the standard rodeo events, the Black Hills Spur and Bit Club will put on a mounted quadrille, an exhibition buffalo ride will take place, and wild buffalo will stampede across the arena. The Black Hills is the range of one of the country's few remaining buffalo herds.

The Red Lodge, Mont., rodeo also takes place on July 3rd, 4th and 5th, and they're paying a total of $3,000 in prize money. The judges will be elected by the cowboys participating. Red Lodge has a very active Rodeo Ass'n, which is planning still another show this year. There's always a good line-up of contestants here. Red Lodge, you may know, is the home town of the Linderman boys and the Greenoughs.

St. Paul, Ore., is having its 12th annual rodeo on these same dates. Prize money here comes to 7,600 bucks, plus a special trophy to the all-around best cowboy. The boys will be up against the local Oregon stock of Harley Tucker of Joseph.

Another bidder for the contestants on these popular dates in Levelland, Texas, where they're paying $400 for each of five major events. Levelland claims to have the biggest arena in Texas. Grangerville, Idaho, and Greely, Colo., also have shows on these dates, as does Reno, Nev.

The well known Abe Lefton is announcing at Reno, telling the fans how the boys make out against Harry Rowell's stock. Dick Griffith will be there with his new rodeo act—his fireball jumpers and trick riding horses. Dick has had trailers built to order for his fine horses.

No doubt some of you fans throughout the West will be taking in the rodeos going on right now.

There are plenty of these—the Livermore, Calif., rodeo on Sat. and Sun., June 14th and 15th; Pioneer Days at Polson, Mont., on June 7th and 8th; the Santa Maria, Calif., rodeo on May 31st and June 1st, sponsored by the local Elks; and the King City, Calif., Stampede on June 8th where, besides the usual events, they're putting on a jackpot team steer-roping contest, prize to be $500 for the best team on a five-steer average.

Sonoma's 19th annual rodeo is on June 7th and 8th, celebrating California's Military Centennial and jointly sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce and the U. S. Army.

Plenty of arena champs are expected—Gene Rambo, 1946 all-around champion cowboy, and Bud Linderman, his runner-up; former all-around or bronc-riding champions Burrel Mulkey, Jackie Cooper, John Bowman and Perry Ivory.

The Salinas, Calif., rodeo, about which we told you last time, is coming June 19-22nd. Right now Ferdinand, the Salinas Rodeo bull, is riding the highways mounted in state on a Mercury convertible, to advertise the show. Ferdinand gets around. Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, Sonoma, Monterey, he sees them all. He's been going strong ever since he started advertising rodeo 15 years ago, and it's estimated he's traveled some 10,000 miles.

Adios,

—THE EDITORS

The Holloway Hellions

By CHANDLER WHIPPLE

THE STORY SO FAR:

When WENDY HOLLOWAY comes home, she finds that Singing Woman has grown from a trailside village to a booming railroad town. Although MA HOLLOWAY is largely responsible for its prosperity, she knows that violence is rampant and tries to keep her daughter away from the Golden Glow restaurant and dance hall, which Ma has developed into the most glittering gambling palace in town.

However, Wendy stays, partly because her two brothers, RAND and JOHNNY, are away. In fact, rumor has it that Johnny has joined outlaws in the hills and turned bad.

Things seem not to have changed when she is greeted by her old friend, DOC LATHROP, by "JUDGE" HARRISON PARNELL and banker KANE LISBEE. But they are interrupted by LEE VICKERY, who is driving cattle to the railroad and warns Ma he'll tolerate no fleecing of his men at the Golden Glow.

Later the Golden Glow is held up, and Wendy follows the tracks of the gunmen to a water tower, where she finds Doc Lathrop, hanged. Searching for a clue, she picks up a piece of paper, but before she can read it, someone sneaks up behind her and knocks her unconscious.

PART 2

LEE VICKERY had aimed to ride back and rejoin his herd that night. He had arranged with the cattle dealer to bring the herd in the next day, and he had completed his one-man crusade on the saloons and gambling halls of Singing Woman with what appeared to be mainly satisfactory results. So after his abrupt dismissal by Wendy Holloway, he turned his mount and started down the street to the southward. The Pitchfork cattle were to be bedded down about four miles out.

That Holloway gal had certainly given him short shrift. He didn't know as he could blame her, at that. He was going to have to see her again. There was something about that gal, maybe the way she sparkled when she was mad, that you couldn't forget. If he stayed on here a spell, looking for good northern grazing land as his father had talked about having him do, he was determined he would see a lot of Wendy Holloway.

Funny thing—just what was she up to when he came upon her there in the street? Had a horseshoe in her hand, seemed to be trying to follow a trail. Must have been something to do with that holdup.

Why, that was dangerous business for a young gal to be monkeying with. She could get in a heap of trouble. He shouldn't have left her to go on alone.

Lee had ridden to the edge of the town. In all that time Wendy Holloway had not been out of his mind. Now abruptly, he turned his mount, headed back into Singing Woman.

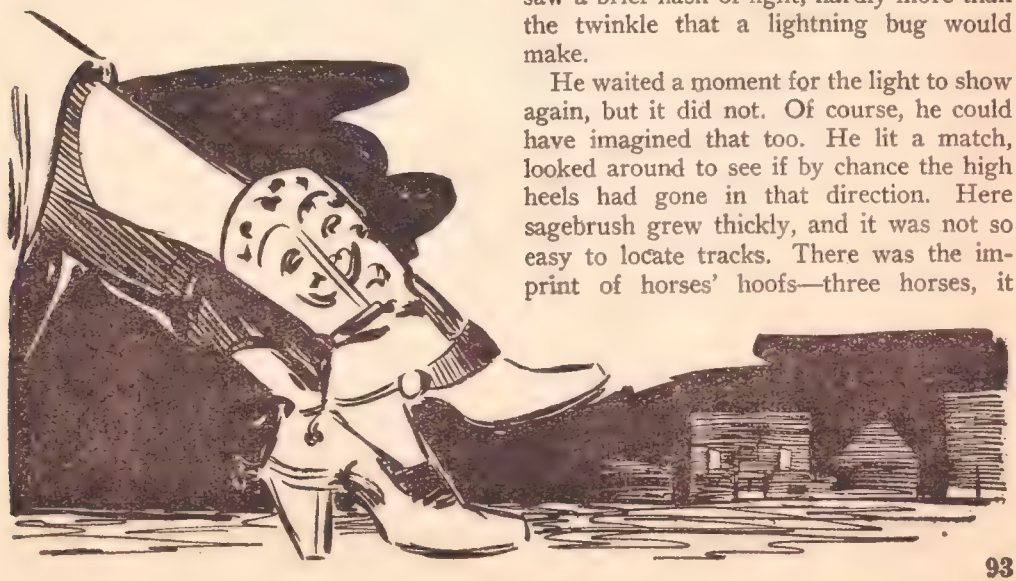
He passed the Golden Glow and the Wagon Wheel. Both of them seemed to be going full blast again. Fortunately he remembered the alley up which Wendy had gone and turned into it.

Once back of the main buildings though, he was a little lost. Which way would she have gone from here, and why? She was wearing high heels, he remembered. He slid from the saddle, searched until he found the print of a high-heeled shoe in the soft ground.

It was slow work, following those high heels in the darkness. Once he heard a sound like a distant scream and stood up, trying to locate it. It did not come again. Maybe he had imagined it; or maybe it was a cougar, strayed down from the hills. But he could not get it out of his mind.

Lee followed the heelprints until he got beyond the tangle of sheds and outbuildings. Then he paused and looked around. There were the loading pens, black dark now. There, down the tracks, was the water tower, and as he looked that way he saw a brief flash of light, hardly more than the twinkle that a lightning bug would make.

He waited a moment for the light to show again, but it did not. Of course, he could have imagined that too. He lit a match, looked around to see if by chance the high heels had gone in that direction. Here sagebrush grew thickly, and it was not so easy to locate tracks. There was the imprint of horses' hoofs—three horses, it



looked like—and now and then other marks that could be heelprints.

That and the light he thought he had seen made up his mind for him. The scream too, he could not forget; it must have come from that general direction. He climbed into the saddle and rode slowly toward the water tower.

He was halfway there when a flash of light cut the darkness at the foot of the water tower and the roar of a gun came to his ears. In the flash he saw two figures by the tower.

"Wendy!" he yelled impulsively. "Miss Holloway!" He spurred his horse and raced forward.

THERE were no more shots, no further sound. Lee Vickery brought his mount to a sliding stop just short of the water tower, leaped from the saddle with his cocked .45 in his hand.

He hesitated a moment, searching for hidden gunmen in the darkness, but all he could see were two figures sprawled on the ground. Slowly he went forward, looking down at the nearest of them.

He got down on his knees and cried "Wendy!" again. She lay there so still that he was certain she was dead. But he took hold of her wrist and felt a faint pulse beat.

He looked for a gunshot wound, could find none. Then he turned toward the body of Dr. Lathrop. That man had been dead for some time. There must be someone else around, the one who had hit Wendy Holloway. He wished fervently that he could have that gent lined up over his gunsights for just about half a second. But he must have gotten away into the darkness, and there was no time to hunt for him now. Lee had to get Wendy to a doctor.

Very gently, he picked her up in his arms. He climbed awkwardly with his burden into the saddle and headed back toward town. All the way in, he held Wendy's wrist, watching to see that the pulse beat did not fade.

As Lee Vickery came out onto Main Street, two riders were heading his way from the north. He did not wait for them, but accosted the first man he saw.

"Where at can I find a doctor?" he asked.

"Doctor?" the man answered. "Why, Doc Lathrop's the only one in town. Now, you go down to the first right turn and then you—"

He did not get to finish. A sound, too deep for a woman's scream, too high for a man's roar, swept down and enveloped them both. The two riders had drawn up beside them.

"Wendy!" Ma Holloway cried. "What's happened? What've you done to her?"

"Ma'am," Lee Vickery answered, "I ain't done nothin', except pick her up and try to get her to a doctor. Somebody shot her—but I can't find where."

"Then get her to the doctor!" Ma snapped. "He's—" She turned to the man on the plank sidewalk. "Is Doc Lathrop back yet?"

"Ain't seen him," the man said.

IT WAS a strange group gathered in Ma Holloway's rooms above the Golden Glow: Lem Hanson, trying to look official and important; Lee Vickery, seemingly at ease but not quite able to roll a cigarette properly; Judge Harrison Parnell, pacing the floor with something less than his usual aplomb; Ma herself, as usual dominating the room with her relentless energy. But the center of attention lay quite still upon the bed, not speaking or making any sound—sometimes, her mother thought, not even breathing.

"A blow on the head, that's what it was," said the judge, who was acting as the nearest thing present to a medical man. "It couldn't have been a bullet. I don't think there's a fracture, but—"

"But we won't know till we get a doctor," Ma declared. "And it's two hundred miles to Butte Junction, even if they start the minute they get our wire."

"Four or five hours," the judge said. "If they send an engine through right away with a doctor aboard. He'll be here before morning."

"Mornin'!" cried Ma. "She could be dead before mornin'."

"Now Ma," soothed the judge. He put a hand upon her arm. Then he leaned over,

for the tenth time, and tested Wendy's pulse.

Over in the opposite corner, Lem Hanson stood by the window, his thumbs in his vest pockets, facing Lee Vickery. Lee had at last gotten his cigarette lighted. He listened to the sheriff, but his eyes were upon Wendy.

"So you claim," said the sheriff, "that you just followed Wendy on a hunch. No other reason."

"Reason enough, ain't it?" Lee flushed. He was not going to explain that he could not put Wendy out of his mind. "It looked like she was up to somethin'. Looked like she might be headin' for trouble."

"Ah," said the sheriff. "So you knew there was trouble over there at the water tower. Maybe trouble you'd started yourself."

"Look here," Lee said, "I come to town to ship a herd of cattle. What would I be messin' in the town's affairs for? I'm all-fired sick of us cowmen gettin' blamed for the stinks you townfolks stir up yourselves."

"But the fact is that you did mess in the town's affairs," the sheriff pointed out. "You were mighty free earlier in the day passin' out ultimatums to the townfolks. And the fact is that Doc Lathrop didn't hang himself—nor Wendy knock herself over the head."

"I told you, Sheriff," Lee answered, "that there was somebody else there. The gent Wendy fired at. Most likely the gent that hung the doctor."

Lem Hanson did not seem to notice the little muscles around Lee's throat jumping as he strove to hold himself in check. The sheriff shrugged.

"So you did say," he agreed. "And that could be the man that killed Doc Lathrop. Provided we could find any sign of that man having been there."

Lee stood up. He tossed his cigarette out the window. He leaned forward a little on the balls of his feet, hitching at his gunbelt.

"Sheriff," he said, "you done called me a liar twice. It sounds like you're tryin' to make out I'm the one that hit Miss Wendy and killed the doctor. I don't know about your courts here. Maybe you could make that stick. But you've got to get me in jail first. That'll take some shootin'."

He paused a moment, added quietly, "If that's what you want, let's start the shootin' now."

LEM HANSON backed up a step. His face paled, and he cleared his throat. It was hard to say what would have happened next if Ma Holloway, overhearing the conversation, had not suddenly stepped forward.

"Confound it," she snapped, "cut out your caterwaulin'. Both of you. There'll be no shootin' here. We've got enough troubles as it is."

With that, she turned on her heel and went back to the bed.

Lee Vickery smiled a tight smile. The tension eased. Lem Hanson spread out his palms in a gesture of peace, came closer to Lee.

"Now Vickery," he said in a lower voice, "I don't want you takin' this personal. But a man's been killed—a mighty important man in this town. I've got to get at the facts."

"I'm not aimin'," Lee assured him, "to keep any facts from anybody."

"That's what I like to hear," the sheriff said. "Now, I was just showin' you how it might look to some people. Other people—" he motioned Lee back to his chair, sat down himself and leaned close— "other people might look at it differently. Here's a man killed, accordin' to this view of things, because he was a Vigilante. Looks like the doc was tryin' to help bring law and order to this town.

"Not, of course," Lem Hanson amended, "that we don't have a fair share of law and order here already. But anyhow, let's say the doc found out somethin' about somebody, workin' under cover. Somethin' it was dangerous to know. They'd maybe kill him, wouldn't they?"

"I shouldn't wonder," Lee admitted, puzzled. "What you drivin' at now, Sheriff?"

"Well," said the sheriff, "who would it be? A saloon owner, maybe? Not just any dive owner, of course. It would have to be somebody that appeared respectable

—somebody that would be hurt bad if the truth got out."

"Meanin' who?" Lee asked.

The sheriff looked significantly over his shoulder. "Not meanin' anybody in particular," he said. "Just tryin' to figure this out. Now, what do you think Wendy was really doin' there by the water tower, Vickery? Got any ideas at all?"

Lee's face reddened with anger. "Blast you, Sheriff—" he began.

But the sheriff cut him off with a smile and a pat on the shoulder, stood up.

"Now, no need to be gettin' excited, Vickery," he assured Lee. "I'm just tryin' to figure things out from every angle, is all. You do the same. You think back, think of everything you saw, and we'll talk it over later. Vickery, the law knows how to treat its friends in this town. Don't do any harm to help us. Now, I've got to be goin'."

He turned, walked over and looked at Wendy. He shook his head. "Sure sorry, Ma," he said. "Sure hope she pulls through. We could learn a lot from her."

Something in the way he spoke made Lee shudder. He watched the sheriff go to the door and walk out. Then he, too, got up and walked over to Ma Holloway.

"Mrs. Holloway," he said, "you've got to get her out of here. Right off."

MA HOLLOWAY bristled. She was not used to taking orders. She was not even sure, for that matter, if this young man were on the level—even if he had brought Wendy back.

"What are you talkin' about?" she demanded. "How could I get her out of here now, even if I wanted to? What makes you think there's such an allfired hurry?"

"Why—" Lee paused. Actually, he did not know why. It was just a hunch. "Dang it all, this ain't no kind of a town to bring up a young gal in anyhow. Gamblin' and killin', liquor and loose women and such."

Because Ma Holloway had been thinking these things herself a while back, she was all the more furious. She put her hands on her hips and her eyes blazed at Lee Vickery.

"Why, you no-good, psalm-singin' cow nurse," she spat. "What do you know about bringin' up kids? You're only a slick-ear yourself. I've brought up three kids and I've brought 'em up right. So they can live wherever they're put down. So they can take care of themselves and keep out of trouble. More than—"

"Wendy didn't," Lee interrupted, himself angry now. "And it's your fault she's in trouble, because you let her live in this danged town. And it's up to you to get her out of here before she gets in more trouble."

"Blast you," Ma cried, shaking a fist at him, "you shut your trap. Get out of here before I throw you out. I'll take care of my kids in my own way. I'd ought to have let the sheriff plugged you, you no-good Texas brush-popper."

Lee backed away. It was no use trying to argue with this woman. He was too mad to argue any more anyway. If Ma weren't a woman—

"I'll get out," he said. "I've had all I want of these stinkin' towns and the folks in them. The air's a heap clearer out on the range. Fer all I care, you and your whole danged family can be strung up from the water tower."

With that he stalked out. He started to slam the door behind him, remembered Wendy. The door closed slowly and very softly.

Ma looked strangely at Judge Parnell. She had not missed the quiet closing of the door, and that somehow had drained the anger out of her, leaving her empty. She went over and felt again of Wendy's pulse. She could still feel the beat, faint but regular.

"Harrison," she said, "you go down to the station. See if they got any answer to our wire."

"If you think it's necessary, Ma," the judge answered. "But I'm sure they'd send it right up if they had." The judge, with his poundage, was rather averse to walking any more than he had to.

"Anyhow," Ma said bluntly, "I want to sit here a spell. By myself."

"Why certainly, Ma," the judge said. "I'll be getting along."

A LONG TIME ago it seemed since Ma Holloway had come to Singing Woman. Fifteen years back, she had ridden in from Kansas with a daughter and two sons and all her worldly goods loaded precariously on an oxcart. The worldly goods did not amount to much —quite a few pots and pans, some bedding and even less in the way of furniture. But a few other things rode with Ma Holloway that were not so evident. One was her youth and her high hopes, in spite of the bitter thing that had happened to her. Another was her indomitable determination to bring up her little brood in the straight and narrow path, and to see that they got the advantages she had not had during her hard life.

The third thing that rode along with her was hatred, hatred of one man. This was the man she had once loved and had married, the man who had casually left her the day after Johnny was born. A man had to have some freedom, he said, three kids was just too many. Besides, there was a sight of money to be made just over the hill around the border towns. Easy money, too; sometimes you took it with the flick of a card, more often you took it at the point of a gun. But afterward you rode wild and free, and that was the only life for a man.

Ma Holloway did not fight him when he left. She had not learned so much about fighting one's way through the world then as she did later. She simply wiped him from her life, as you would wipe the writing from a slate. She told the children that he was dead; she swore to herself that they would never learn the truth, neither from her nor their father.

These memories and this determination, Ma Holloway brought with her children to the little town of Singing Woman, and not much else. There were not many to notice her arrival, and there was not much to see in Singing Woman then. Kane Lisbee was there with his bank, and Alf Nixon, since dead, with his general store. Lem Hanson was sheriff and Doc Lathrop was practicing medicine, more often on horses than men. There was a hotel of sorts, which Kane Lisbee also owned in part, just a place where you could flop and maybe get a cup of coffee and something that passed for a sandwich.

Ma and her brood slept in the oxcart that first night, and they did not have much to eat in the morning. Afterward she looked around the town, and eventually she saw Doc Lathrop. She borrowed a few dollars from him. The next thing she had taken over an abandoned shack below the bank and was sawing and hammering and fixing it up. Rand helped her with the job. Four-year-old Wendy worked too, but actually she caused more trouble than the good she did, for she was into everything. And Johnny was a baby.

THE NEXT morning, the Golden Glow Restaurant opened for business. Ma named it that because of the way the setting sun had shone in and caught the shine of the freshly scrubbed floors, just at the time when she was about to drop from weariness. There were quite a few customers that first day, and as the word got around they kept coming.

Ma found ways to keep them coming. She started a garden plot at the edge of town, so that there would be fresh vegetables on the table. She bought chickens and a cow for fresh milk. Eventually she even bought a litter of pigs, so that there would be ham and bacon and sausage.

The Golden Glow grew very popular. It got so every cowpuncher within fifty miles of Singing Woman hunted for an excuse to visit the town every so often, not so much to visit the bar in the hotel as to eat a dinner at the Golden Glow. These same punchers would bring in freshly killed venison and other game for Ma Holloway to cook, for nobody could make it taste quite as good as she did.

The children grew to the trouble-raisin' stage, but Ma took care of that. There was plenty to do, weeding the garden, tending to the pigs and chickens and the cow. Randy was not the trouble-making type anyway, quiet and studious, and she could see that she would have to send him away to school to be ready to meet the problems of the bigger town of Singing Woman that would be here some day. Wendy

always found time to get in some mischief, but Doc Lathrop watched over her; she would have to send Wendy away too, when she really began to grow up. As for Johnny, he was a thoroughly normal boy and she did not worry much about him. In time he would take over the job of running the Golden Glow, and maybe then Ma could sit back and rest a spell.

That was the way it had seemed to her, and that was the way she had planned and worked and schemed. It got to be a passion with her, the things she would do for the children, until in time perhaps the passion blinded her to reality, and all she did was to work to make everything she laid her hand to bigger and better. Including the town itself.

She had done the job, all right. But now, sitting there beside the bed, looking at Wendy, Ma Holloway was sure that somewhere along the line something had gone wrong. She had tried too hard. Out of the little town of Singing Woman she had created a monster, and it had risen to strike her. And now it was too late to turn back.

"If only Johnny was here," she said, thinking aloud. "Don't want to drag Randy back—but Johnny, he could help us."

"Johnny...." moaned Wendy.

"Wendy!" Ma stood up, leaned over her daughter. "You—you spoke."

Wendy opened her eyes and tried to sit up. "Ma," she whispered, "they killed Doc Lathrop. Hung him . . . it was a bill of sale.... Oh, my head hurts."

"If it's just a headache," Ma said through her tears, "we can cure that. You just lie still, Wendy."

THE PITCHFORK herd was in. Yesterday the dust of their coming had spread itself thickly over the town of Singing Woman. Today, by mid-afternoon, the last of them had been shoved through the loading pens and into the waiting cattle cars. Lee Vickery waited until the engine had been hooked onto the cars and was chugging away with its live cargo to the eastward, then he turned away, headed uptown to join the Pitchfork punchers who were already celebrating the end of the long wearisome drive.

On the way he stopped at the post office. He had been expecting some word from his father in Texas, but in the past few days had had too many things on his mind to look for it. He found a letter awaiting him.

> I've talked it over some more with folks who have been up there, and it looks to me like my hunch was right. We want some of that northern range. From what I hear, there's some of the best grazing land in the country up there.
>
> Look around and see if that ain't right. Keep half the beef money and send the rest back by Jeff. When you find what we want, lease it. Or buy it if you have to. Stay as long as you need to. We'll start a herd of two-year-olds up the trail in the early spring and fatten them through the summer. Maybe it will pay us to sell out entirely down here in another year. We'll see about that. Main thing now is to grab onto some good range.

Lee was not surprised. They had talked about this possibility before he left on the drive, and he had rather thought this would be Jim Vickery's final decision. That meant he would be staying around a spell. It might also mean that he would see Wendy Holloway again.

He went on down Main Street, finally located the Pitchfork boys at the Wagon Wheel. Some of them had been paid off the night before, after the cattle were inside the yards, and these boys were well along in their celebration. Most of the rest were doing a fair job of catching up. Jeff Patterson, an older man and top-hand of the Pitchfork crew, was taking it easy, sipping his whiskey a little at a time.

Lee got him aside and told him about his father's decision. Jeff nodded, "Makes sense," he said. "I expected it. Now let's see, you want I should cut out that black geldin' for an extra mount for you?"

Lee spent the rest of the afternoon doing the rounds of Singing Woman with the boys from the Pitchfork. He was not having much fun, though; he kept thinking about Wendy Holloway. How slight and pale she had looked lying there unconscious. He wondered if he could get up the nerve to brave Ma Holloway again and find out how Wendy was making out.

It seemed to him, in the course of his wanderings, that he kept hearing the Holloway name mentioned. The first couple of times he turned quickly, but it was never anyone he knew doing the talking. After that he began trying to catch the words. He never did quite get the gist of the talk, but he did not like what he heard. It sounded as if the Holloways were not very popular in Singing Woman, as if they had been up to murder or something of the sort.

HE ALSO saw Judge Harrison Parnell quite a few times, but the judge refused to recognize him. He got the feeling that Parnell was following close upon the heels of this talk. Finally, his last time in the Wagon Wheel, Lee was able to get close enough to the judge to buttonhole him so that he could not escape.

"Miss Wendy," he said promptly, "how is she?"

The judge, as if recognizing him for the first time, beamed.

"Why bless you, young man," he said, "Wendy's fine. Before the doctor got there from Butte Junction, she was conscious again. It wasn't serious; he told her to take it easy for a day or two. But it's a good thing you got there when you did, young man. It is indeed."

"Why, thanks," Lee said. "I was just—"

But the judge was gone again. In spite of his bulk, he seemed to have vanished completely. Lee finally give up trying to pursue him. He was so relieved at the news of Wendy that for the moment nothing else really mattered anyway.

It was early in the evening, after they had had a big supper at the Golden Glow, that the Pitchfork crowd began to break up. Lee himself had gotten a room at the hotel. It had been a wearying day down at the loading pens, and he was ready to turn in. Jeff Patterson and a few of the older punchers decided that they had already had enough of Singing Woman and its pleasures. They were going to start back for Texas, ride out a few miles and make camp for the night and so be ready for an early start in the morning. The few remaining punchers who still wanted to make a night of it would start back tomorrow. They could still catch up with Jeff and the rest of the crew.

Lee said good-by to Jeff and the crew outside the Golden Glow. It made him a little homesick. He had ridden with Jeff Patterson almost since he was old enough to climb on a horse.

"See you in Texas before the winter's out," he said.

JEFF and four other Pitchfork punchers rode on through the town. Singing Woman was really booming tonight. Lights and music poured out of the Golden Glow and the Wagon Wheel and a couple of smaller dance halls farther down the street. Drunks spilled out of doorways and occasionally a shot was fired. The Pitchfork men hardly looked to right or left. They had hit the trail towns before, and they knew that the morning after the taste was always sour.

They rode slowly, just wanting to get far enough to be out under the stars again. Less than an hour's riding brought them to the spot where they had bedded down the herd the last night on the trail. There, to their surprise, they found a fire. Charlie Gaines, the leathery old cook, was waiting there for them with the wagon, in spite of the fact that the night before he had sworn he was heading back instantly for Texas. Waiting with him was the wrangler and the remuda.

"Figured some of you'd have sense enough to come out here by tonight," Charlie said. "Got some coffee hot."

They unsaddled their mounts and sprawled out, happy and at home again. Jeff Patterson was just rolling himself a cigarette when he heard hoofbeats coming fast from the direction of town.

"Looks like one of the other boys has had enough," he said.

But it was not a Pitchfork man. It was a boy none of them had ever seen before. He rode up to the campfire and slid from the saddle.

"Lookin' for Jeff Patterson," he said.

"That's me," Jeff told him.

"Got a note fer you."

The boy handed it over. It looked as if

it had been hurriedly written by Lee Vickery.

> Jeff:
> I ran into what looks like a good deal in some grazing land right after I left you. Hate to have you chasing back, but I'd sure like to have you talk to this gent before you go home, so you could tell Pa about it. I'd appreciate it if you'd mosey back tonight.
> Lee

Jeff smiled. It sounded as if Lee was falling into the clutches of some land shark. He sure had better mosey back.

"Okay son," he told the boy. He handed him half a dollar. "I'll be right along." He turned to the wrangler. "Pete, catch me another hoss, will you? Might's well bring in that black geldin', too. I was aimin' to leave it for an extra mount for Lee."

"Trouble, Jeff?" one of the punchers asked. "Need any help?"

"Not likely." Jeff laughed. "Just business. You can stay right in your *soogan.*"

BY THE TIME Jeff had gotten his mount saddled, the messenger boy was gone. He must be in an allfired hurry to spend that half dollar, Jeff decided. He started out alone, leading the black gelding on a short length of rope.

He had thought Lee had more sense than to get tangled up in something like this. Still and all, maybe it was really a good deal. Some rancher fixing to sell out and let his leases go, maybe. Anyhow, it was a good night to be riding—no moon but not too dark, with just a touch of autumn chill in the air.

He covered the first couple of miles at an easy trot. Neither his own mount nor the black had been ridden that day, and they were willing to travel. He recognized the spot ahead where the trail curved sharply around a rocky outcrop on the right, with a grove of piñon on the left. It was just a little over a mile from there to town.

Just as he came abreast the curve, he heard a faint sound in the piñons. Jeff was not the kind to ignore any sound. He slipped the rope of the lead horse into his left hand, along with his bridle reins.

"Lift 'em! High!" barked a voice from the piñons.

Jeff might have taken a chance by spurring his horse and lying low in the saddle, but he did not want to leave that black gelding behind. It was too good a cowhorse. So he reined in and sat his saddle.

"Looks like you're mighty hard up for pickin's, friend," he said. "Holdin' up a poor cowhand."

"Never mind that. Get them hands up," the voice said. "We know you've got the Pitchfork beef money."

Jeff Patterson was very calm. He had been in worse spots than this before and gotten out. He was a fool to have kept the beef money on him, he realized now. Most likely Lee had not written that note at all. This whole thing was a simple trap, and he had walked right into it.

This was bad, all right, but the thought of actually handing over the beef money never occurred to him. He raised his hands just a little, but at the same time his eyes turned toward the piñons. There were two of them—he could see the shadows. Two was not too many for a man with good night eyes like Jeff's. Besides, they were foolishly bunched together. Maybe they would both ride out of the piñons together to take the money.

For a man who was about to die, no matter what move he made, Jeff Patterson's reasoning was very sound.

"Okay boys," he said. "Looks like you've got a big talkin' point there. Come and get it."

Neither of the two moved. Something was wrong, Jeff sensed. He looked quickly to the right, toward the rocky outcrop.

Up there, a Winchester blazed, but Jeff Patterson did not hear the sound, because the bullet crashed into his brain. He was dead as he slid from the saddle.

"Well, Lefty," said one of the men in the piñons, "I guess we got that gent lined up right for you."

"Thanks," answered a voice from the outcrop. "Shootin' is a sight less trouble than hangin'."

THE FIRST day after she regained consciousness Wendy had a splitting headache that kept her in bed. She heard the bawling of the Pitchfork cattle

as the drive went down to the loading pens, and learned that it was Lee Vickery who had picked her up by the water tower. She made a mental note that it would be fitting and proper to look up that young man and thank him.

That would have to wait for a day or two, however. She talked with Judge Parnell and her mother, trying to piece together all that had happened the night before and to weigh its significance. Sheriff Lem Hanson came up to question her briefly, but she did not have much to offer. There was the piece of paper, but she had not been able to save it, had barely been able to glance at it. As to the man who had hit her over the head, he was only a vague shadow, of medium height, with a voice she could not identify.

At that point, the sheriff seemed to lose interest in questioning her. About all her testimony could do, he said, was to clear that young Texan. He would have to find another angle to the case in order to track down the men who had murdered Doc Lathrop. Maybe it was the same three who had held up the Golden Glow. They had gotten away but he would bring them to justice yet, he said.

The next day, in spite of her mother's adjurations to rest and keep quiet, Wendy managed to find excuses to get out several times into the town. In the course of this, she made several inquiries of storekeepers and others whom she happened to meet. Before the day was out, she had found out a great deal about gold mining on Squaw Man Creek.

She still had not found out quite what she wanted to know. Wendy still remembered that when she came back to consciousness her mother was talking about Johnny. Since then she had wormed just enough out of Ma Holloway to know what she had meant. That, plus a lot more things that Wendy guessed but did not know, made her determined to do one thing—find Johnny. Trouble of some kind was brewing for the Holloways, and they needed him.

Strangely, though most of the citizens Wendy talked to knew something about the gold mines, none of them knew anything about Johnny Holloway. Or if they did, they evidenced a strange lack of interest in discussing him. One or two admitted that they had heard he was "somewhere up there," but "somewhere" included at least fifty or a hundred square miles of hills.

Wendy had just about given up hope when, walking down the street after supper on a trumped-up errand at the hardware store, she encountered Kane Lisbee. He walked along with her a ways, and he seemed disposed to talk. She did not expect that the banker would have much knowledge of affairs around the gold mines, but to her surprise he did. Evidently business, probably in connection with the shipments of gold ore from the mines, took him fairly often to the smelter which had been set up in the Squaw Man district. Yes, he had even seen Johnny once or twice, had a vague idea of where he was likely to be found.

"I'll be glad to take up word to him," he said. "As a matter of fact, I'm riding up tomorrow."

"Word isn't enough," Wendy answered. "I want to see him. Couldn't I ride up with you tomorrow?"

"Well now—" Kane Lisbee did not seem too pleased at first, but after he had thought a moment, he smiled. "I don't see how I can keep you from going," he said. "Of course you can."

ON THE way back from the hardware store, Wendy, full of the thought that at last she would see Johnny, almost bumped into Lee Vickery. He was on his way out of the Golden Glow, where he'd hoped to see Wendy. Now his eyes brightened, and he smiled.

"Sure looks good to see you lookin' so pert again, Miss Wendy," he said.

Wendy decided that she liked his smile very much. "I've been wanting to see you."

"You have?" The smile became a beam.

"Why—yes. To thank you for finding me, the other night."

"Sure glad I did," he told her.

"Some people just don't have much sense, do they, Mr. Vickery?"

"I wouldn't say that. Anyhow I hope I'm going to see considerable more of you. Goin' to be around a spell. Lookin' for some good grazin' land."

"I've heard there's some on the way up to the gold diggings," Wendy said. "I'll have a look for you tomorrow when I'm up that way."

She had spoken half in banter, but she wished she had kept quiet. She did not want word of her plans to get to her mother, and Lee Vickery looked alarmed.

"Miss Wendy," he said, "you ain't goin' up there! That's mighty rough country, from what I hear. Ain't you been in trouble enough?" He added, "If you go up there, I'm ridin' along."

"Thanks," Wendy laughed. "But I've already got company. Very safe and respectable company. The local banker."

"Oh," said Lee. He looked disappointed. "I see. Well—good night, Miss Wendy."

PARNELL spread wide his hands. "That's all I found out, Ma," he said. "I don't know where it's leading to, but I don't like it."

Ma Holloway did not like it either. Things were going badly in Singing Woman. Twice in the past two days she had tried to arrange an undercover meeting with others of the local Vigilantes, but somehow they had not gotten together. Perhaps the others were scared, because of the murder of Doc Lathrop, but she was beginning to suspect, from the judge's report, that it was more than that. Rumors were running through the town, rumors that boded ill for Ma Holloway and the Golden Glow. They were lies, of course, but that made no difference if you could not pin down the men responsible for them.

Ma would not have cared so much if it were just herself in trouble. She could fight her way out as she had before, but with Wendy here it was different. The man who had struck Wendy down had given warning, and now that they knew where she was most vulnerable, they would strike at her again through her daughter. Yet she could not keep Wendy cooped up here like a prisoner, even if she tried.

"Blast it, Judge," she said, "we've got to get Wendy out of town."

The judge smiled ruefully. "Wendy," he said, "has a mind of her own. I can't imagine where she came by it. She is also very loyal to her family. Where do you suppose she came by that?"

But Ma could not smile at his witticism. "We've got to get her out of here," she said, "if we have to drag her out. If we have to kidnap her." Then she smiled, pounded a fist into a palm. "Say, that's an idea, Judge."

"Hum," said Harrison Parnell thoughtfully.

"Harrison," Ma said, "you run along now. I've got a little thinkin' to do before Wendy gets back. Maybe tomorrow I'll have some plans."

The judge went, but Ma Holloway did not have a chance to do any thinking that night. He had been gone but a few moments when there came a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" Ma asked, getting ready to say, "You can't come in."

She did not have a chance to do that either. The door opened, and a man entered the room. He took off his hat as he did so. His hair was streaked with grey, but he was still handsome. His clothes fitted him well, and his boots were well-made though worn. He wore two guns, slung low on his thighs.

"I didn't want to tell who it was," he said. "I wanted to surprise you, Beth."

MA HOLLOWAY looked as if she had seen a ghost. She found a chair arm and gripped it hard. She took a deep breath.

"Where the devil did you come from?" she said. "I thought they'd hung you long ago."

"Hung me?" He smiled. "Why Beth, you know hanging's too good for me. You've said so yourself. And you know I'm too smart to get hanged."

"Maybe," she said. "What are you doing in this town?"

"In Singing Woman?" he said. "How could I keep away from it, Beth? It's got a reputation all over the West, since the railroad came through. It's the finest place of all, for a man who makes his living by his wits and his guns. Of course, I had no idea I'd find you here. That was a pleasant surprise."

Ma took a step toward him. "You're

dead, Steve," she said. "The kids know you're dead. Can't you stay buried? Can't you get out of this town?"

He went to the window and looked out. He turned back, smiling. "Not with a set-up like this I can't," he assured her. "It's too good being alive."

"I guess you came here to blackmail me," Ma said tonelessly. "All right. I've got some money. How much will it cost me to get you out of here?"

He walked back and forth across the room a couple of times, as if thinking it over. He scanned the ceiling, twirling his pearl-grey sombrero casually. He hitched at his gunbelts.

"Yes, you've got a nice little place here, Beth," he said. "But not that good. No, I don't think blackmail would interest me—there's too much money rolling around. I'd raher play it my own way."

"I might have known it," Ma admitted. "You never were a small-time crook. I know your way; I know the kind you'll tie up with. That means you'll be fighting me—maybe with guns. That's the way it's shaping up."

HE SHOOK his head. "It shouldn't be," he said. His voice had lost its bantering tone. "Now look here, Beth, you ought to get out of this. This town is really tough. Can't you see it's nothing for a woman to be mixed up in?"

Ma Holloway turned her back on him. Her face was white with years of pent-up fury.

"I can't even look at you," she said. "I'd spit on you thinking about it. Too tough for a woman, is it? It wasn't too tough for a woman to be left with three kids, was it? How the devil did you expect me to bring them up, unless I got tough myself?"

"Now now, Beth," he said placatingly, "that's no way to look at it. Trouble was, you just couldn't wait till I'd hit the jackpot."

"Jackpot!" She shot out the word, whirled on him. "You know where your jackpot lies—six feet underground. Steve, ain't you got smart yet? Don't you know your ways are done? Ain't you heard that the West is growin' up? Another year and even this town will be civilized—a fit place to bring up kids in. There ain't so many road's ends left. What'll your kind do when they're gone?"

He shrugged. "Don't preach to me," he said. "I'll still play the hand I've got."

"Then get out," Ma Holloway cried. "I may have to see you hung yet, and I don't know as I'll like it. Get out before I tell you what I really think of you."

"In that case," he said, "I'll go. I don't know as I'd want to hear that. I'd hate to know that you'd learned to use such words."

With that he was gone. Ma Holloway stalked once across the room, then back again, trying to calm the mixture of emotions boiling within her. As she came back, there was another knock at the door. It opened a crack, and Harrison Parnell peered in.

"I was just thinking, Ma," he began, "about that—"

"Stop thinking and get to bed!" Ma roared. "And the first thing in the mornin', you find that Texas cowhand. Bring him here and I'll eat crow. We've got to fight tougher gents than I thought. I've got to have somebody willin' to fight back."

The judge was still shuddering at Ma's unexpected outburst as he walked back down the stairs. But when Wendy came in a few minutes later, she found her mother sitting in a chair with her head in her hands. It seemed as if all the fight had gone out of Ma Holloway.

KANE LISBEE had said he would make an early start, so Wendy had dressed in boots and riding breeches and was ready to leave the moment she had finished breakfast. She told her mother that she was planning to ride out into the country with the banker, and to her surprise Ma Holloway made no objection. Wendy wished she dared to tell her mother the whole truth. She seemed almost listless this morning. Sometimes Ma Holloway could fool you—she would be planning a big coup behind her apparent calm. But this, Wendy thought, was not one of those times. Something more had happened than her mother would tell her.

About all her mother said was, "Take

along that .38, Wendy. Can't tell when you'll see a coyote."

Wendy got a good mount from the livery stable and met the banker in front of his hotel. Some people said that the only reason Kane Lisbee lived in that hotel was because he owned it. Thanks to Ma Holloway's cooking, it no longer made a pretense of serving food, but it had lodging.

The banker seemed in a very cheerful mood. As they crossed the railroad tracks and headed north and west, he began to point out items that he thought would interest Wendy. Even the beauty of the sagebrush, with the mist of an autumn morning hovering over it, or the quick scamper of a jackrabbit from their path did not escape his eye. The man had a spot of warmth and poetry in him. Wendy began to wonder if his seeming coolness toward the Holloways through the years had not stemmed more from shyness than dislike.

The sun warmed the haze away and the world was bright and fine. They came onto rolling ground where buffalo grass grew thickly. The town of Singing Woman was now little more than a smudge on the horizon. Wendy turned once and looked back at it. She could see only a dim huddle of raw buildings barely thrusting themselves up from the horizon, as if in a last, determined effort, they were fighting to be seen and to prove their existence. Nearer, a lone rider was heading this way. Wendy looked around at the green foothills and the multicolored, rock-ribbed range beyond.

"It's good country," she said. She took a deep breath, as if she could thus absorb it and make it her own.

"Yes," Kane Lisbee answered. "Man's country. Good country if you're willing to fight for your share of it. Relentlessly."

Wendy looked at him, puzzled. He had spoken as if he were defending himself against an accusation. Did he speak thus because he had not fought hard enough, or because he had fought too hard? She did not know.

They came at last into the foothills. Here the trees grew thickly, scrub oak and pine, and in the open spaces the grass was still green. Crossing a rise, they came upon the lower reaches of Squaw Man Creek. Even now in autumn, down here on the lower ground it was so broad as to be almost a river rather than a creek. It burbled here over stones and yellow gravel, softly and slowly, and Wendy thought how nice it would be to plunge her feet in it.

From here on they followed the creek, climbing higher into the hills. Once they spotted a coyote slinking through the timber, less than a hundred yards away, and Kane Lisbee challenged Wendy to hit it with her .38. She took the challenge, brought down the beast in two shots. Lisbee shook his head as if amazed.

"I'd never have believed you could do it," he said.

They came after another half-hour's ride upon the smelter, where the ore was processed for hauling down to Singing Woman and shipping out by railroad. A dozen men were working there, a rough-looking lot. They stared curiously, even insolently at Wendy, and they seemed to know Kane Lisbee well.

AT FIRST Lisbee's inquiries about Johnny Holloway brought only vague responses. Yes, they had heard of him, or they knew him. He was around here somewhere, but they didn't know where. Finally a man came forward who had the answer.

"Holloway?" he said. "Sure I know him. Don't see much of him, though. Mostly his pardner is around."

"But he must live somewhere," Wendy said.

"Sure. Sure. Him and Sandy Hedges has got a small claim. Little shack on it, I think. Now, you follow right up that little branch creek. 'Bout two-three miles, I'd guess. Anyhow, you can't miss it. They pan their own gold right in the creek."

Wendy brightened. After all the talk and inquiries, it was as simple as that. She thanked the man.

"I'll ride right up there," she told Lisbee. "There's no need of your going with me."

"Since it's so near, I won't," Lisbee said. "I'll attend to my business here. If I'm finished before you're back, I'll wait."

Even that, Wendy thought, was hardly necessary, but she agreed to it. At any rate,

she was a trifle relieved that Lisbee wasn't coming with her. She wanted to talk to Johnny alone.

The creek valley twisted and turned, so that Wendy could never see far ahead. She was getting higher into the hills, and the timber was becoming more sparse. Just an occasional stand of scrub oak or pine to relieve the massive rock walls all about her.

She rode the first mile or so without incident. Far ahead, she heard a sound like a shot. Probably it was only a falling tree or a dislodged stone tumbling down. These rocky hills could do strange things to sound. Just the same, she hurried her mount a little up the trail.

Rounding a curve in the canyon, she saw a cabin not a quarter mile ahead. It was built close to the stream, at a spot where the canyon broadened out. That must be it.

IN FACT, she was sure of it. There was a man going toward the cabin now, and she was quite certain that it was Johnny.

"Johnny!" she called. "Johnny Holloway!"

Apparently he did not hear her. He was hurrying toward the cabin, had broken into a run. Wendy spurred her horse.

When she got to the cabin, Johnny was down on one knee with his back to her, right before the doorway. Wendy slid from the saddle, started toward him.

"Johnny!" she said again. "What's—"

He whirled swiftly, coming up from his knees. By the time he faced her, there was a cocked .45 in his hand, pointed straight at her. In another split-second, he would have fired.

"It's Wendy," she said.

At the same time he recognized her. The .45 went back to its holster. He tried to grin, but the grin did not come off very well.

"Why, so it is," he said. "Good gosh, Wendy, you've growed. You're—awful pretty."

"But Johnny," she said, "what's wrong?"

He stepped forward, awkwardly put his arms around her and kissed her. "I thought you was a murderer," he said.

"Murderer?"

He turned and pointed. Now she could see, just inside the cabin door, the body of a man. It was an old man, with sandy hair and beard.

"My pardner," he said. "Sandy Hedges. He's dead. Somebody just murdered him."

They walked up to the cabin. Sandy had been shot in the back, apparently as he stood just inside the doorway. Wendy looked around her at the canyon walls, but they seemed as empty of life as the body inside the cabin.

"I heard the shot," she said.

"So did I," Johnny answered. "I was up the creek about half a mile. They must have been just waitin' for us to separate."

"They? Do you know who it was, Johnny?"

"I don't expect Sandy had an enemy in the world," he answered. "He was an awful drunk, but he was a genial cuss. No, I don't know who it was, but I've got a mighty strong idea why. I guess they've found us out."

"What do you mean?"

"We've struck it rich. Couple weeks ago. Found a rich vein up the canyon. We've been tryin' to keep it dark, goin' right on with our pannin' for a few dollars a day—but it looks like it didn't work."

A sudden thought struck Wendy. "If that's it," she said, "then they'll be after you too. Johnny, we've got to find out who it is and hunt them down."

He shook his head. "There's plenty of folks up here would murder for a rich claim," he told her. "It could be any one of them. And murder's easy here. You can't trail a man through these rocks."

SOMETHING in his calm acceptance of these facts troubled Wendy.

"Johnny," she said at last, "Ma's been hearing strange tales about you. That you'd gone bad, joined up with the outlaws that are robbing and killing up here. Johnny, you didn't—you didn't kill Sandy Hedges because of the claim, did you?"

"I ain't that bad, Sis," he said. "Don't know who's been spreadin' those stories. Most everybody up here goes a little light on the law; this is tough country. A man gets around and he learns a lot. Maybe I know more about the owlhooters than's good for me. But I ain't taken to murder."

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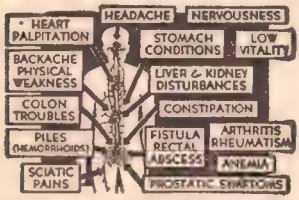

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"Oh." Wendy was almost convinced. "But Ma never heard from you. Said you'd just wandered off with some drunken old sourdough."

"Sure." Johnny spoke with some defiance. "Sandy was a drunk, all right, but he had plenty savvy. I've figured if I could keep him sober, off and on, sooner or later we'd strike it rich. I was right. And I didn't aim for Ma to hear from me till that happened. Dang it all Wendy, Ma's awful bossy. A man's got to make his own life. She wanted me to stay in town and run the Golden Glow—but you know doggoned well who'd be runnin' it."

Wendy laughed. She knew he was talking straight now, and she felt good all over. Of course he was the same Johnny.

"Yes," she said. "I know who'd be running it."

"Daggone, Wendy." Johnny grinned. "Sure is good to have you back. I can talk to you." His face sobered. "Only I wish this hadn't happened."

"I'm beginning to wonder," Wendy said. "It's funny that it happened just now. And that talk that was getting down to town about how wild you were. Johnny, I think all the Holloways are in for trouble."

"Huh? Not Ma?"

Wendy told him about the murder of Doc Lathrop, the robbing of the Golden Glow.

"Johnny," she said, "I'm beginning to think it's all part of a plan. To get rid of us. There must be some folks that think the Holloways are too strong. That want to run the town themselves. You'd better come back to town, Johnny."

"Maybe you're right," he admitted. "It kind of fits together, don't it? I reckon—"

He was looking down the canyon. Wendy turned. Half a dozen men were riding toward them. Kane Lisbee was not among them, but she recognized the man from the smelter who had directed her here.

THEY rode up, and three of them climbed off their horses. They barely nodded to Wendy and Johnny. One of them walked toward the cabin door. He examined the body of Sandy Hedges brief-

ly, then turned back to face the others.

"He's dead, all right," he said. "Holloway, you thought you was gettin' away with somethin' easy, didn't you?"

"Talk sense, Wade," Johnny said. "Some skunk shot Sandy when I was up canyon."

One of the three men still mounted, Wendy noticed, was shaking out his rope.

"Johnny's right," she cried. "I can testify—"

"A sister's word," Wade said, "won't go with us. We've got a better witness. We've got a man that saw it."

"What are you talkin' about?" Johnny asked.

"We knew it was comin'," Wade answered. "Sandy came to me two days ago, told me you'd been tryin' to murder him in his sleep. So we set Tim here to watchin'. He was up on the canyon wall when you killed your pardner."

"Wade," said Johnny, "that's a lie. The whole of it. I can prove it. I'll be mighty glad to stand trial."

"You've done had your trial, Holloway," Wade told him. "You'd ought to know we don't wait for the law on Squaw Man Creek. Not when it's a man like Sandy, that never harmed a soul. You goin' to make it easy, or do we start shootin'?"

For a long moment Johnny did not answer. They didn't have to murder him outright to get the claim. They could hang him with at least a faint show of legality. And there were six of them. His hand was on his .45 and he could get quite a few of them. But there was Wendy. Besides, they were sure to get him in the end.

"I'd sure like the chance to plug you first, Wade," he said at last. "I reckon I could do it. But I'll make it easy for you, if you'll do one thing. If you'll promise that my sister gets safe back to town."

"That," said Wade. "we might do."

Johnny's hands had started to rise. Wade took a step forward, as if bent on relieving him of his gun.

"No, Johnny!" cried Wendy. "They're lying! They knew I'd be here. It's part of their plan. They'll kill us both."

(To be continued in the next issue)

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Amateur Page

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Young 'Un

JUST a little fellow
A-kickin' up a fuss,
"A-mahin'" and "a-mooin',"
Makin' fun of us.
Oh, he's a lot of trouble
You don't know the half,
It takes a full-grown cowboy
To brand a baby calf.

Herbert Willig, Philadelphia, Pa.

The Ballad of Pecos Pete

PECOS PETE caught a roan one day,
As wild as horseflesh gets to be.
He saddled it an' straddled it—
The pony thought that it was free,
An' started, yes, it really started home!

Pecos Pete stayed on ten yards,
An' then he left the hoss.
He landed on a cactus bush
An' hollered to the boss:
"Come ease my pains an' patch my busted dome!"

Pecos Pete kind of liked the ground,
So he bought himself a flivver.
He took his gal to a dance one night
An' drove it in the river.
It's best to travel on your own two feet!

Pecos didn't like his luck,
So he traded for a spread.
The creek went dry, an' his hay blowed away,
An' all his cows were dead.
Well, fate an' fortune surely had him beat!

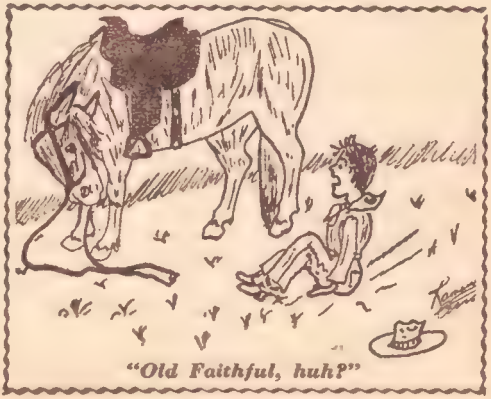
Pete took to makin' liquor,
An' a right good business, too.
But the revenuers come 'round an' took him
To jail a-feelin' blue.
And that's the sorry tale of Pecos Pete.

Bob Nichols, Arkadelphia, Ark.

Desert Spell

IT IS noontime on the desert and the sun is blazing high,
There's not a cloud above me in the brassy, burning sky;
Way out there I see the highway leading far across the sand,
Where the cars are always passing out beyond this desert land;
It is night upon the desert and the stars shine out so clear,
Somehow stars seem closer, brighter, when I'm watching them out here;
Now the lights gleam on the highway, and they seem like lights of home,
But they pass on . . . all too swiftly . . . and again I am alone,
All alone upon the desert, and I often sigh and say,
"Sometime I'll take a journey out along that broad highway,
And I'll meet and talk with people, walk the busy streets of town,
Yes, some day"—but bright above me the laughing stars look down,
And I know I'll never leave here, this must always be my home,
For there's never an escaping once the desert claims its own.

F. R. Bragg, Iola, Kans.



"Old Faithful, huh?"

Ramona Pearson, Almina, Wis.

AMATEUR PAGE

Bunkhouse Blues

I'VE been thinking of the boss at the ranchhouse
And how he's such a lucky guy.
He sleeps in a room with windows
Big enough to see a patch of the sky.

He washes in a nice clean basin.
He dries on a towel snow white.
He sits on a chair when it's mealtime,
And his clothes fit him just right.

But we poor guys at the bunkhouse,
It's different with us, you know.
We sleep in a room with windows
So small that the sky doesn't show.

We wash on a bench just outside the door
On which stands a large battered pail,
And there's never a spot that is clean or dry
On the towel that hangs on the nail.

When it's chow we sit on a hard, narrow bench,
And our clothes are a sorry loss,
But we poor guys at the bunkhouse
Sure wouldn't change jobs with the boss.

Thelma Schultz, Portland, Ore.

Lost or Stolen

WHILE ridin' through Laredo,
A-singin' a song one day,
I spied a dark-eyed lassie
A-standin' by the way.

I tipped my hat politely;
She tossed a pretty smile,
Stepped up to me, a-blushin',
And asked me to stop a while.

"No, ma'am, I'd best shove on," I said,
And continued on my way.
But somewhere in Laredo
My heart had gone astray.

Patricia J. Hallas, Brooks, Minn.

Carefree

OH, THE LIFE of a cowboy is happy and free—
There's nothing to worry an hombre like me.
I'm just like the breeze that tangles my hair,
If I sleep on the range there's no one to care.

I haven't a sweetheart, I don't want a wife,
A scrap with my buddy is my only strife.
Should my bronc buck me off there's no one to weep—
They may bury me shallow or bury me deep.

The blue sky above me all sprinkled with stars,
My horse and my bedroll beats a palace and cars.
The coyotes to howl and the ground owl so eerie
Is novel enough, when a man is dead weary.

Oh give me the range, with lightning and thunder,
With its wide open places of beauty and wonder;
A herd of fat cattle to follow all day
And no other cares, when I hit the hay!

Jennie L. Richard, McGill, Nev.

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Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. We ask you to refrain from using it as a medium for practical jokes and particularly not to sign your letters with other people's names.

Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

A Small Town Shut-in

Dear Editor:

Please print my plea for letters. I am mostly closed in by four walls, and I do get lonely at times. I was born April 7, 1909 and have not taken a step since I was 16. As I can't get out and go and do things, I look forward to my mail from day to day for most of my pleasure. I love to hear from people all over the world. I live in a small town. I collect post cards, stamps, pictures of everybody. So, folks, if you want to make me happy just fill my mail box full of letters. Please don't disappoint me.

BERTHA JENNINGS

Gen. Delivery
Lometa, Tex.

Tall Pen Pals for Leta

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt at Our Air Mail. Please print this plea. I would like tall pen pals. I'm a girl actually 6 feet tall, weigh about 150. I have poor health and cannot do very strenuous chores or recreational things, for this reason I have plenty of time on my hands. I like to write letters and read, cook and do fancy needle work. I have medium brown hair and Irish blue eyes and am 21 years of age. I'll answer all letters as promptly as possible, young, old, men or women, everyone is welcome. So please fill my mail box.

LETA CRAVEY

Box 57
Yarnell, Ariz.

Paula Misses the GI's

Dear Editor:

During the war my parents and I welcomed many of your soldiers to our house and did our best to give them a home from home. We liked them very much and got on fine, but we miss them now they are gone. Any letters from America would be very welcome. I promise to answer all I get, and exchange snaps, magazines, etc. I am 21, tall, brown-haired, blue-eyed, and simply longing to hear from anyone in the U. S. A. so come on boys and girls, please write to an English girl who is lonesome for a letter.

PAULA JEAN BAILEY

65 Institute Road
King's Heath
Birmingham 14, England

Idaho Sport Fan

Dear Editor:

I read RANCH ROMANCES regularly and enjoy it very much. Keep up the good work. I am 18, blond, blue eyes, 6' 1". Like most sports, especially football and basketball. I would like very much to hear from fellows and girls of all ages and from all parts of the world regardless of nationality. Come on, all you ink slingers, drop me a few lines. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snap shots with all who would like to.

VAUGHN DEMER

Box 56
Murtaugh, Idaho

Palestine Paratroopers

Dear Editor:

We are five members of the 6th Airborne Division in Palestine, and we would be extremely grateful if you would publish this letter in your very popular magazine. We would like to correspond with girls, preferably Americans as so many of our boys seem to have been forgotten by their English girls. All letters will definitely be answered.

PTE. H. VINCENT (Harry)
PTE. F. WATSON (Jock)
L/CPL. C. SNELL (Cyril)
PTE. W. CARROLL (Bill)
PTE. T. OVERTON (Tom)

6 Pln. "S" Coy.
1st Parachute Batt.
British Army Middle East Land Forces

A Chinese Canadian

Dear Editor:

Do you have room for a lonely boy from Vancouver? I'm a Chinese Canadian boy of 17 years. My hobbies are stamp collecting, plane pictures collecting and like dancing and quite fond of sports. I'd prefer American Chinese pen pals. Won't someone please write to me?

GEORGE YU

501 E. Georgia
Vanouver, B. C., Canada

Two Invalids

Dear Editor:

We are two girls with rheumatic hearts in a convalescent home. We are very lonely and would welcome mail from all over the world. We are both interested in the West and foreign countries, but we would like mail from everywhere. Evelyn is 20 and Helen is 17. We will exchange photos and promise faithfully to answer every letter we receive. Come on, everyone, don't disappoint me.

HELEN BLEVINS
EVELYN WATSON

St. Gabriel's Convalescent Home
Catonsville 28, Md.

The More the Merrier

Dear Editor:

I would like it very much if you would print this letter in RANCH ROMANCES. I've tried before but I've never been successful in getting my letter printed. I'm 25 years old, 5 feet tall. I would like to hear from all who are interested. Any age, any color or creed. The more the merrier.

FLORENCE ROSE

121 Ferguson St.
Duryea, Penn.

Jitterbug

Dear Editor:

Here is a gal who loves to write letters. I am 25 years old with brown hair, blue eyes, 5' 2". My hobbies are jitterbugging, taking pictures, all kinds of sports and also riding, as my father owns race horses. So fill my mail box and I'll answer every letter I receive.

ALICE DAWSON

Rt. 1
Outlook, Wash.

From the Blue Ridge Mountains

Dear Editor:

We are a couple of nurses in a country town high on the Blue Ridge Mountains. We have long hours and would like to hear from anyone, especially in the Western States. June is 19, 5' 6", weighs 130, has red-blonde hair and green eyes. Lorraine is 22, 5' 8", weighs 130, dark auburn hair, hazel eyes. We are farm girls and promise to answer all letters.

LORRAINE JACKSON
JUNE McGRADY

Box S
Hillsville, Va.

Albert Gets Acquainted

Dear Editor:

Would it be possible for a young ex-service man who lives in a small country town to join your friendly group and get acquainted? I am 27 years old, weigh 168 lbs., am 5' 7" tall with curly black hair, and blue eyes. I am fond of all kinds of sports, reading and writing. My hobbies are collecting photos, view post cards, and postage stamps. I would like to hear from anybody any age all over the United States, and I would sure be glad to hear from boys and girls in any foreign country.

ALBERT I. ANGEL

Middletown, Mo.

Parlee of Pugwash

Dear Editor:

Please print my plea for pen pals in RANCH ROMANCES. I have read this magazine for some time and I find it very interesting. And now a little about myself. I live in the town of Pugwash, at the present I am attending Pugwash High taking Grade eleven. I am 17, light brown hair and blue eyes. I shall try and answer all letters.

PARLEE FISHER

Box 190
Pugwash, Nova Scotia,

Ruth Joins the Council Fire

Dear Editor:

Move over folks and make room for a part Cherokee Indian girl from Oklahoma. I'd like to put in a bid for a seat at the council fire on the Air Mail page. I am a brown-eyed, high school senior, 17 years old. Would like to get a lot of letters from all four corners of the earth.

RUTH RASBERRY

P. O. Box 744
Barnsdall, Okla.

Irish Colleen

Dear Editor:

I am a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES and enjoy the stories very much. I am interested in all outdoor sports and movies. I would like to hear from pen pals of 30 years of age and over, from all parts of the world. Here's hoping you will print this plea from an Irish Colleen.

JEAN COOKE

17 St. Teresas Pl.
Glasnevin
Dublin, Ireland

Bunny Writes Short Stories

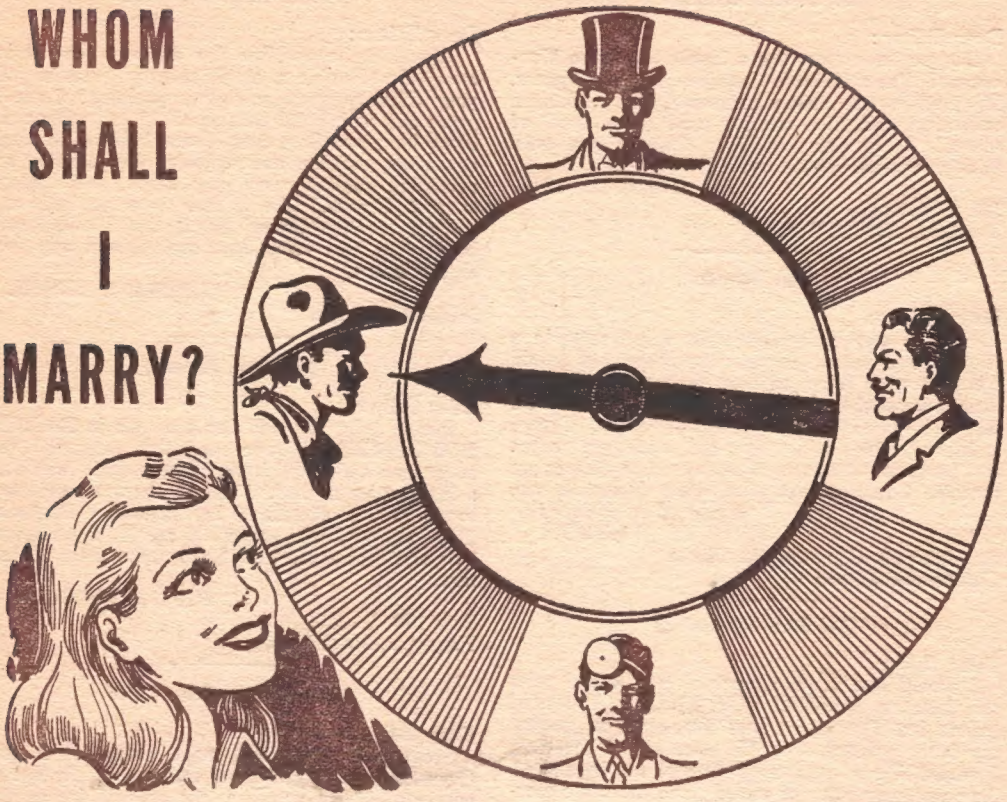
Dear Editor:

I should like to exchange letters with anyone from 20 to 30, male or female. I will answer all letters promptly and am willing to exchange snapshots. I am 5'5½" tall, weigh 117, have chestnut hair and green eyes. Have no special hobbies but enjoy horseback riding and short story writing.

BUNNY DIETRICH

343 Third Avenue W.
Roselle, N. J.

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?



Man of Cancer ***June 22—July 23***

By Professor Marcus Mari

CANCER, the fourth sign of the zodiac, comes into astrological power at the northern limit of the sun's course, in its declination. Men born at this time have a good deal of originality. They do their own thinking, prefer to work alone, are inquisitive, aggressive, and stubborn. They believe in themselves and this takes them far on the road to success.

They have a lot of tact, a quick understanding, and a sharp, pointed wit. They have a knack for getting along with both men and women and follow the advice of Catherine the Second of Russia who said, "I praise loudly; I blame softly."

Others sometime find their energies exhausting. Cancer men are not given to sitting around with a book. They must be up and doing. They are the adventurers of the world, the colonizers, the men who enjoy doing things out-of-the-ordinary.

They are kind-hearted, quick to go to the defense of any underdog and generous to a fault. Strong and vital, men of the Cancer sign seem to shape their own destiny. When they want something, they go out and get it, but actually a lot of hard work lies behind their amazing successes. The girl who marries a Cancer man will have a rich and full life.

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends this coupon to him in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

Name..... Sex.....

Address.....

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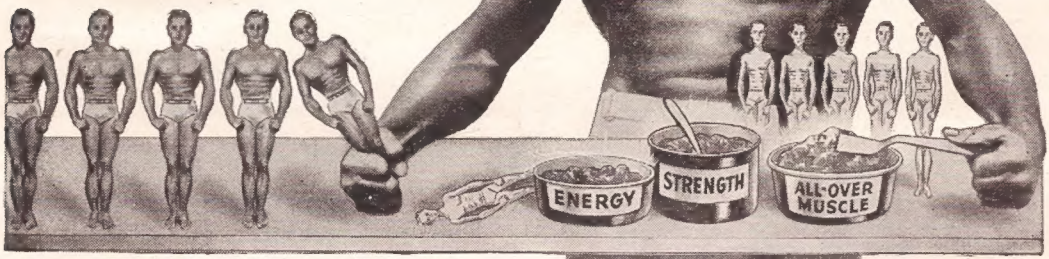
Exact date of birth: Year..... Month..... Date of Month..... 7-11-47

What's My Job?—I Manufacture Weaklings into MEN!

GIVE ME a skinny, pepless, second-rate body —and I'll cram it so full of handsome, bulging new muscle that your friends will grow bug-eyed! . . . I'll wake up that sleeping energy of yours and make it hum like a high-powered motor! Man, you'll feel and look different! You'll begin to LIVE!

Charles Atlas

Actual photograph of the man who holds the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."



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That's how I traded in my "bag of bones" for a barrel of muscle! And I felt so much better, so much on *top of the world* in my big new, husky body, that I decided to devote my whole life to helping *other* fellows change themselves into "perfectly developed men."

What Is "Dynamic Tension"? How Does It Work?

When you look in the mirror and see a healthy, husky, strapping fellow smiling back at you — then you'll be astonished at how *short* a time it takes *"Dynamic Tension"* to GET RESULTS!

"Dynamic Tension" is the easy, NATURAL method you can practice in the privacy of your own room — JUST 15 MINUTES EACH DAY — while your scrawny shoulder muscles begin to swell, ripple . . . those spindly arms and legs of yours bulge . . . and your whole body starts to feel "alive," full of zip and go!

One Postage Stamp May Change Your Whole Life!

As I've pictured up above, I'm steadily building broad-shouldered dynamic MEN — day by day — the country over.

2,000,000 fellows young and old, have already gambled a postage stamp to ask for my FREE book. They wanted to read and see for themselves how I'm building up scrawny bodies, and how I'm paring down fat, flabby ones — how I'm turning them into breath-taking human dynamos of pure MANPOWER.

Take just a few seconds NOW to fill in and mail the coupon at right, and you will receive at once my FREE book — "Everlasting Health and Strength"— that PROVES with actual snap-shots what *"Dynamic Tension"* has done for others — what it can do for YOU! Address: **CHARLES ATLAS, Dept 97, 115 East 23rd Street, New York 10, N. Y.**

FREE

Mail the coupon below *right now* for my FREE illustrated book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." Tells all about *"Dynamic Tension"* methods. Crammed with pictures, facts! Address me personally: CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 97, 115 E. 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

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